The New Criterion

October 1994

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *October 1994*

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Christopher Carduff reviews books regularly for *The New Criterion*.

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Daniel Mark Epstein's new book of poems, *The Boy in the Well*, will be published next year by The Overlook Press.

Roger Kimball is the author of *Tenured Radicals* (HarperPerennial).

Richard Lourie is the author, most recently, of *Hunting the Devil*, a true-crime account of a Russian serial killer (HarperCollins).

Frederick Morgan's *Poems: New & Selected* is published by the University of Illinois Press.

Enid Shomer's latest book of poems is *This Close to the Earth* (Arkansas).

John Simon reviews theater for *New York* magazine and films for *National Review*.

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Notes & Comments: October 1994

Enter the Association of Literary Scholars & Critics

Everyone knows what has happened to the study of literature in the academy. It is no longer news, either, that the nation's largest organization of literary scholars, the Modern Language Association, is completely captive to the political agendas that have transformed the study and teaching of literature into programs of ideological indoctrination. During the decade that *The New Criterion* has been reporting on these developments, the intellectual misrule of the MLA passed from the realm of farce and scandal to what it is today: an intellectual catastrophe with immense consequences for the future of American cultural life.

The time has clearly passed for hoping that the MLA could be reformed from within. The faddish radicalism that the MLA embraced in the last decade or two has by now become institutionalized and entrenched. So long as this bureaucratic behemoth with its tens of thousands of members and immense institutional prestige and power continues to occupy its place in academic life unchallenged, the profession of literature will continue to be beholden to the politicized agenda that has made the MLA a synonym for scholarly dereliction and a home for tenured radicals.

We have often had occasion to point out in these pages that one of the greatest obstacles to challenging the hegemony of the radical ethos celebrated by the MLA is the widespread passivity and timorousness of the professoriate. Many, many professors privately are appalled by the deformation of literary studies that proceeds under the various banners of queer theory, multiculturalism, deconstruction, poststructuralism, and all the other ideological movements that have a strangle hold on the profession in so many institutions. But there have been precious few professors who have been willing to speak out publicly about these issues. We suspect that this quiescence has been in part due to a reluctance to get involved in issues that are by nature time-consuming and divisive; sometimes it has been simply a matter of cowardice.

Whatever the motivation in the past, however, there are some new breezes blowing in academia. The MLA and its sister radical organizations are still very much in ascendance, but they are no longer the only voices being heard. One of the most welcome developments on the literary front is the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, a new organization that has now been created to challenge the doctrinaire radicalism of the MLA and to provide an independent forum to support the study of literature—if we may put it so—*as* literature. The fledgling Association, which met in Boston in September to discuss organiza-

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tional matters, has already attracted over three hundred individuals from various academic departments around the country. It has also gone out of its way to encourage the participation of scholars and critics outside the academy—those who write for readers, not tenure. Among the well-known figures who have lent their support to the Association are E. D. Hirsch, Richard Poirier, Denis Donoghue, Mary Lefkowitz, John Hollander, Roger Shattuck, and Christopher Ricks. As this list suggests, it would be a mistake to regard the Association as a conservative or right-wing alternative to the MLA; on the contrary, it is a *literary* alternative to the aggressively non-literary politics that have come to dominate the MLA and much of the professoriate. As Professor Ricks observed recently, "The concern is not the presence of politics in the MLA; it's the absence of non-politics. . . . It does seem that race, gender, empire, and gayness are the only aspects under which literature is seen to exist there."

Publicly, anyway, Phyllis Franklin, executive director of the MLA and an ardent supporter of the MLA's radical agenda, has welcomed the appearance of this new competitor. Its existence is, she said in a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, a "sign of vitality." Who knows if that is what she really thinks; we hope so, because this once, at least, we can whole-heartedly agree.

Readers interested in obtaining additional information about the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics may do so by writing to Ricardo Quinones, Bauer Center, Claremont McKenna College, 500 East Ninth Street, Claremont, California 91711.

It's all applesauce

There has been a lot of talk lately about the "dumbing down" of our major cultural institutions—what we used to be able to call without quotation marks "elite" cultural institutions. That the quotation marks are now necessary already speaks volumes about the degradation of American museums, orchestras, universities, publishing houses, public television, and serious—that is, "serious"—newspapers. We feel a little silly calling attention to the phenomenon at this late date: it is a bit like observing to Noah that it has been an unusually wet season. And yet every now and then something comes along that catches us up short, that makes us appreciate with new force the wisdom in the old adage that things are always worse than you thought.

The latest such reminder came to us from the "Week in Review" section of the Sunday *New York Times* early in September. There, under the heading "Ideas & Trends," was what the editors at the *Times* undoubtedly referred to as a "think piece" called "Retooling Critical Theory: Buddy Can You Paradigm?" It was written by Ben Yagoda, who teaches journalism at the University of Delaware and who is the author of *Will Rogers: A Biography*. This essay brought us the cheerful news that the reign of "theory" in the humanities departments of our colleges and universities was now "on the ebb." Everyone who had been critical of deconstruction, poststructuralism, and the other unlovely allotropes of politicized hermeticism that had all but destroyed the study of literature in the academy could at last breathe easily. Mr. Yagoda and his sources in the academy agreed that we were now in the age of "Posttheory." Happy thought! Quoth one authority from the University of Virginia, "deconstruction is pretty much dead." What had happened? According to Mr. Yagoda, the attacks on the academic establishment mounted by writers such as Camille Paglia, Dinesh D'Souza, Roger Kimball, and David Lehman combined with economic pressures to roll back the tide of "theory" and nudge many professors toward "more accessible, belletristic writing styles." "Obscurity," Mr. Yagoda explained, "has lost some of its appeal."

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Will Rogers used to say that he only knew what he read in the papers. We wonder what he would have thought had he come across Mr. Yagoda's rumination in the *Times*. It strikes us as one of those special pieces in which even the punctuation contains a distortion or gross simplification. Mr. Yagoda is correct that deconstruction as such is no longer the novel rage it was a few years ago; he fails to see, however, that this is not because deconstruction is "dead" but because its techniques and its corrosive cynicism have been assimilated and are now simply taken for granted.

Sometimes, to be sure, Mr. Yagoda is simply wrong, as when he writes that "undergraduate classes . . . are by and large insulated from the winds of fashion and continue to be conducted in the traditional way —close readings of great books." Would that it were so! In fact, both the undergraduate curriculum and the methods of teaching it have been deeply compromised by the radical fads that Mr. Yagoda assures us have disappeared. How else can one explain the prevalence of pop culture, the movies, and third-rate "ethnic studies" novels in the curricula at the vast majority of colleges?

But the really unforgivable thing about Mr. Yagoda's little effort at cultural analysis is not that it is wrong—although it assuredly is wrong—but that it operates at such low intellectual wattage. Just how dim are the readers of *The New York Times*? What Mr. Yagoda presents them with is the Special Ed version of cultural criticism. He trivializes the astute analysis of deconstruction that David Lehman provides in his book *Signs of the Times*, completely misses the radical agenda behind the movement called "cultural studies," and generally simplifies out of recognition every idea he stumbles over. Here for example is his précis of the new theories that are supposedly on the wane: "Drawing on the doctrine of structuralism, which held that human behavior and creations were the product of deeply ingrained, not easily discernible patterns and structures, the new theories argued that meaning was ambiguous, socially constructed, frequently self-contradictory. So was the concept of the Great Author, which was seen as a once useful, now outmoded fiction." And *War and Peace*, as Woody Allen said after taking a speed-reading class and reading the novel in ten minutes, is about Russia.

Mr. Yagoda belongs to the Don't Worry, Be Happy school of criticism. Things seem A-OK to him partly because he believes that when you get right down to it ideas don't really much matter. All those obscure theories and dicta emanating from the English departments of our great universities: to Mr. Yagoda they are just a parade of academic fashions—some are pink, some are blue, but all, to vary another famous dictum of Will Rogers, are pretty much applesauce. About midway through the piece we came to a sentence that epitomized Mr. Yagoda's approach. "Academic styles," he writes, "are always coming and going, of course, with a new approach sometimes even being a demonstrable improvement on what came before (Einsteinian versus Newtonian physics, for example)." This amazing sentence is wrong in more ways than we could have thought possible: it is wrong to presume that the substance of intellectual debate is simply a matter of "style" or fashion; it is wrong to suggest that "improvement" in the humanities is relevantly comparable to progress in scientific theories; and it is wrong to imply that the theory of relativity superseded Newtonian physics. Members of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Adverbs will also want to take note of the abuse that "even" suffers in this sentence.

Still, we hesitate to be too hard on Mr. Yagoda. In some respects, he is an innocent who has strayed into foreign territory. But we might have hoped that the editors of *The New York Times* would demand from the writers that they publish at least elementary competence in the subjects they write about. That the *Times* no longer does is part of the scandal of our time.

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What's wrong with equality?

by Roger Kimball

All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.
—Benedict de Spinoza

We Applaud Ourselves.
—Poster seen in a school entrance hall

Of the many dispiriting statistics cited in William Henry's brief but important new book, *In Defense of Elitism*,[1] perhaps the most dispiriting comes from a recent (1992) study by the Department of Education. Based on a survey of more than twenty-six thousand adults, this study estimates that fifteen *million* American adults are entirely illiterate. It also projects that an additional seventy-five million American adults have only minimal reading and computational skills: a third of this group can just manage to tote up the weekly grocery bill, almost none can compose a simple business letter. Even if this projection overstates the case by 50 percent, it is still a frightening bit of news and a staggering indictment of our culture. How is it, after the long war on illiteracy waged in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, that we now find ourselves slouching toward illiterate barbarism? No doubt there are many pieces to this distressing puzzle, of which the failure of inner-city schools is perhaps as much a symptom as a cause. Mr. Henry, who had been a Pulitzer Prize–winning cultural commentator for *Time* magazine before his untimely death shortly before the publication of this book, does not supply a direct answer. But the portrait of American society that emerges from his book suggests that the answer has a great deal to do with the ideology of radical egalitarianism.

The premise of Mr. Henry's book is that since World War II—and particularly since the 1960s—"nearly every great domestic policy debate" has been a battle between elitism and egalitarianism, and that "egalitarianism has been winning far too thoroughly." It should be said at the outset that Mr. Henry acknowledges that the egalitarian impulse has an important and beneficent role to play in a political democracy. For one thing, it nurtures a spirit of generosity and charitableness toward those less fortunate than oneself. More to the point, it underwrites what the political scientist Harvey Mansfield has astutely called "the self-evident half-truth that all men are created equal." We are all held to be equal before the law; this is distinct from the many, many ways in which we are unequal. The problem today, as Mr. Henry sees, is that the egalitarian imperative threatens to overwhelm that other great social impulse, the impulse to achieve, to excel, to surpass: "always to be best and to rise above others," as Homer put it in one classic expression of the agonistic spirit. Radical egalitarianism would have us pretend that there are no important distinc-

1 *In Defense of Elitism*, by William A. Henry, III; Doubleday, 212 pages, $20.

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tions among people; where the pretense is impossible, it would have us enact compensatory programs to minimize, or at least to paper over, the differences. The results are a vast increase in self-deception, cultural degradation, and bureaucratic meddlesomeness.

Mr. Henry's diagnosis of this pathology is not new. It belongs alongside the many other attacks on "affirmative action" (i.e., what used to be called preferential treatment), political correctness, and multiculturalism that have appeared over the course of the last six or seven years. Mr. Henry's decision to frame his discussion almost wholly in terms of the idea of elitism adds an element of novelty, it is true; and it should be said that he is an exceptionally able verbal anatomist: he makes mincemeat, delightfully, of his targets; but his conclusions, and many of his examples, will be familiar to anyone conversant with the recent evolution of the so-called "culture wars." Nevertheless, *In Defense of Elitism* is required reading for anyone interested in the fate of cultural life in this country. Perhaps its chief claim on our attention, however, is what it reveals about the paralysis of contemporary liberalism. That is to say, the real pathos of the book arises not from its argument—cogently controversial though it is—but from the sense of betrayal that motivated it. *In Defense of Elitism* is the angry bulletin of a man who woke up one day to find some of his fundamental principles in a state of mutiny. It turns out to be a mutiny that involves us all.

Mr. Henry begins his book by assuring us of his liberal credentials. He was a registered Democrat. He was a card-carrying member of the American Civil Liberties Union. He had collected numerous awards from black, homosexual, and religious organizations for writing about civil-rights issues. He gave money to various left-wing causes. His boyhood heroes were Hubert Humphrey and Martin Luther King, Jr. He once crossed a room to avoid "even being introduced" to Pat Buchanan. He was "not a right-winger." And yet he also always thought of himself as an elitist.

As this litany suggests, the fundamental tension in this book is between two versions of liberalism. On the one hand, there is what we might call traditional liberalism, which embraces elitism; on the other hand, there is egalitarian liberalism, which rejects it. Mr. Henry saw himself as a partisan of the former. But "somewhere along Bill Clinton's path to the White House," he explains, it dawned on Mr. Henry that "elitist" had come to rival "racist" as a pejorative epithet. Suddenly, to call someone an "elitist" was to accuse him of grave moral blindness. One could no longer declare oneself an elitist without risking excommunication from the liberal establishment. With very rare exceptions, politicians shunned the label, knowing it was political poison. (In his last chapter, "Politics by Saxophone," Mr. Henry writes perceptively about the significance of Bill Clinton's efforts to appear anti-elitist.) Teachers and even college professors rushed to deny that they were elitists; art museums, orchestras, and other institutions once frankly devoted to the custodianship of high culture made themselves over into the people's choice.

The only thing odd about this picture is the timing of Mr. Henry's revelation. For in truth, the attack on elitism was in place long before Bill and Hillary's trek to the White House. Mr. Henry was a perspicacious observer of cultural life. What took him so long? He tells us that he grew up in the Fifties and went to college (Yale) "in the Vietnam era." How could he have missed the spirit of anti-elitism pulsating all around him? Did he perhaps sense new winds, *anti*-anti-elitist winds, in the air and bestir himself to capitalize on what he suspected might be a new trend? Whatever the answer, he orchestrated his awakening with keen rhetorical skill. He mustered sufficient indignation and at least the appearance of incredulity to make his book a lively polemic. Mr. Henry was a committed liberal who, in speaking up for elitism, put himself on a collision course with the prevailing liberal orthodoxy. In this respect, his book belongs to that newish genre of liberal criticism which seeks to attack liberalism without, ex-

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actly, repudiating it. Robert Hughes's *The Culture of Complaint* and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s, *The Disuniting of America* are other, best-selling, examples of the genre.

Mr. Henry's basic procedure is to appeal to common sense while at the same time introducing a fillip of politically incorrect sentiment. What is an elitist? In his first chapter, "The Vital Lie," Mr. Henry lists several attributes, including "respect for leadership and position," "esteem for accomplishment," "reverence for heritage," "commitment to rationalism and scientific investigation," "upholding of objective standards," and, above all, "the willingness to assert unyieldingly that one idea, contribution or attainment is *better than* another."

It is of course the last feature that—however indisputable it is in reality—will be most galling to the politically correct. Mr. Henry is not shy about spelling out the implications of his assertion. What he is talking about, he writes, is

> the simple fact that some people are better than others—smarter, harder working, more learned, more productive, harder to replace. Some ideas are better than others, some values more enduring, some works of art more universal. Some cultures, though we dare not say it, are more accomplished than others and therefore more worthy of study. Every corner of the human race may have something to contribute. That does not mean that all contributions are equal. . . . It is scarcely the same thing to put a man on the moon as to put a bone in your nose.

Mr. Henry begins with observations that only a deeply smitten egalitarian could dispute (though the brash use of the word "better" will no doubt set some PC hearts a-flutter). But already by the second sentence he is into contentious territory. Still, although it will pain a cultural relativist to admit it, everything in our experience confirms the truth of Mr. Henry's observations: some ideas *are* better than others, some works of art more enduring. Who can deny it? When we come to Mr. Henry's conclusion, with its audacious comparison of the achievements of advanced Western technology with a barbaric African tribal rite, we can almost hear the indignant shouts. Here again, Mr. Henry is right, but the dictates of liberal orthodoxy require that we avoid saying so.

Mr. Henry rather specializes in articulating shocking, unmentionable truths in this book. There is something to offend nearly everyone—a good if not quite infallible sign of probity. I am uncertain whether Afrocentrists or feminists will be more enraged by this book. On balance, I am inclined to think that feminists will be. Mr. Henry's comment about the bone is sure to put some noses out of joint, so to speak. But his attack on the excesses of feminism is broad-based and unrelenting. He notes, for example, that, according to one leading figure in textbook publishing, "some of the most outrageous misstatements in textbooks are written in deliberately to placate pressure groups, . . . most notably ardent feminists, whom this executive describes as 'the most relentless, overall the worst.' The person in question is sufficiently fearful of retaliation not to want to be identified by name, age, gender," etc. Mr. Henry also includes the usual quota of academic feminist nonsense, noting that a sure way for a woman to get published today is to title her book "Feminism and . . ." or "Women and . . ." filling in the blank with almost anything. "A vast proportion of what passes for female scholarship," he notes, "is either overblown hagiography of minor figures proferred for rediscovery or 'feminist critiques' meant to reinvent the past to suit the needs of the present." Not even the most prestigious university presses are immune. For example, Yale University Press recently published a book called *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*, which, judging from Mr. Henry's quotations, is even worse than it sounds. But my favorite of his discoveries is *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*. It purports to be "a sustained examination of the masculinism of contemporary geographical dis-

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courses"; in fact, a more damaging parody of feminist nonsense is hard to imagine. Here is a brief sample:

> Women's exclusion is not only a question of the themes of research, nor even of the new concepts with which feminists work to organize those themes, but rather a question related to the very nature of hegemonic geographical knowledge itself. . . . I argue that to think geography—to think within the parameters of the discipline—is to occupy a masculine subject position. Geography is masculinist. . . . After examining many of the founding texts of philosophy, science, political theory and history, feminists have argued that the notion of reason as it developed from the seventeenth century onwards is not gender neutral. On the contrary, it works in tandem with white bourgeois heterosexual masculinities.

Such examples of what Mr. Henry rightly calls "whiny bilge" will—or should—make feminists squirm. But what will really set them off are observations such as this: "the unvarnished truth," Mr. Henry writes, "is this: You could eliminate every woman writer, painter, and composer from the caveman era to the present moment and not significantly deform the course of Western culture." Sure, we would lose "individual artists of merit," including such marvelous writers as Jane Austen and George Eliot. Mr. Henry is quick to acknowledge this. But his point holds, and it will hardly matter that he goes on to observe that "this does not mean women are inferior. It simply means they didn't have the opportunity."

Mr. Henry is not gratuitously offensive. The serious point behind his blunt language is that reality cannot be molded to suit our ideology. It would of course be nice for feminism if there were as many important women painters, writers, scientists, statesmen, composers, philosophers, mathematicians, architects, and inventors as there have been men in these vocations. But there haven't been. Why this should be the case is an open question. Lack of opportunity certainly has had something to do with it. Whatever the reasons, it helps no one to argue, as many radical feminists do, that "if women cannot be numbered equally with men in the ranks of proven genius, . . . then the concepts of genius and quality must be discarded as politically unacceptable."

Mr. Henry's attack on the ethic of egalitarianism ranges from the grammatical to the institutional. He rightly deplores the "odious anti-syntactical evasion, 'their'"—as in the popular solecism "everyone has their own way"—and he searingly criticizes the politically correct effort to "integrate" retarded children into classrooms for normal students. He criticizes the multicultural agenda in the new, politically correct *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, and describes as "wicked" (because what is taught to the young will remain with them for the rest of their lives) the decision in New York State to mandate that children be taught that one of the two main sources of the United States Constitution was the organizing pact of the Iroquois Indian Nation. This would, Mr. Henry observes, have been news to the Founding Fathers.

Mr. Henry is refreshingly insensitive to the sensitivity police who demand that one deny reality rather than offend a special interest. "The impulse in current American society," he notes, "is to 'empower' the afflicted, even to the extent of engaging in the charade that they suffer no affliction but are merely somehow different." Writing in *Time*, Mr. Henry once described the dancing in a Broadway show as "clubfooted." Sure enough, an angry letter soon arrived on his desk from an organization representing the clubfooted objecting that his use of the word "implied a deformity." Which of course it did. Because a club foot is a deformity.

Mr. Henry also recalls the case of a high-school student who was a deaf mute but who demanded to compete in an annual speech contest. The topic: "My Voice in America's Future." Contestants were required to submit an audiotape—identified only by number to rule out favoritism—that would be judged by two criteria: the content

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of the speech as written in English and the oratorical style of the contestant's delivery. The deaf mute demanded to be allowed to submit a videotape in America Sign Language, thus avoiding both criteria for the contest. In the end, she agreed to submit an audiotape in which her ideas were translated into English by an interpreter. The girl's mother said "We don't want to just drop this. We want to see things change so that people will be able to accept people who are not quite the same." Of course, as Mr. Henry notes, most Americans routinely accept people who are not quite the same. What this girl and her mother wanted was something else: they wanted her "to do something altogether different and have it be treated as the same thing."

As Mr. Henry points out, our educational institutions, especially our colleges and universities, are among the most powerful bastions of this sentimentalizing tyranny. Many universities, he notes, have "caved in almost entirely" to the PC lobby with its demand for "special-pleading" studies, speech codes, and preferential treatment for designated minorities (including that majority-minority, women). "The historical role of centers of learning," he writes, "has been to preserve standards and protect enduring achievements from the wind and fire of momentary political or populist whim. Now the professsors are fanning the flames."

Nor is the problem confined to higher education. Increasingly elementary and secondary schools are "far less concerned with the educational needs of the children they teach than with the political yearnings of the adults who lobby them." Among other things, this has resulted in a "rewriting of curriculum at every level" in order to bring history into accord with the politically correct version of reality. Thus it is, for example, that one textbook claims that America used the atomic bomb to end the Korean conflict and that Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., were both assassinated during the Republican administration of Richard Nixon rather than the Democratic administration of Lyndon Johnson.

There is also a tendency to transform schools into giant counseling centers whose goal is not the transmission of knowledge but the inculcation of warm feelings about oneself. A professor of early-childhood development whom Mr. Henry quotes recalls visiting a first-grade class in an affluent Middle Western suburb. Each student had produced a booklet called "All About Me." The first page of each booklet listed some basic family information. Then came pages devoted to the questions "What I like to eat," "What I like to watch on TV," "What I want as a present," and "Where I want to go on a vacation." There were no such questions as "What I want to know more about" or "What I want to solve." "Each page," this professor noted, "was directed toward the child's basest inner gratifications." The prevailing narcissistic ethos was epitomized by a banner she glimpsed in the entrance to a school hall: "We Applaud Ourselves."

Mr. Henry sets himself firmly against all these trends. "Schools," he insists, "exist to teach, to test, to rank hierarchically, to promote the idea that knowing and understanding more is better than knowing and understanding less. Education is elitist. Civilization is elitist." Probably the worst aspect of the whole movement for political correctness, he notes, is "the erosion of the intellectual confidence needed to sort out, and rank, competing values." It is grimly ironic that a movement meant to "empower" the hitherto disenfranchised winds up dis-empowering them in the most fundamental way.

Part of the problem is the sheer size of the "higher" education establishment. The quotation marks are necessary because for many students college is no longer a significant achievement but "a mere rite of passage, a capstone to adolescent party time": indeed, so lax have standards become that for many students a college degree is "a credential without being a qualification." About the rise of mass education since World War II, Mr. Henry writes that "the true effects have been to break down the distinction between the accomplished and the workaday, to promote pseudo-scholarship based on gender

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anxiety and ethnic tribalism." Today, the United States spends approximately $150 billion a year on education. Two-thirds of that is public money. Mr. Henry's modest proposal is to "reduce, over perhaps a five-year span, the number of high school graduates who go on to college from nearly sixty percent to a still generous thirty-three percent. This will mean closing a lot of institutions. Most of them, in my view, should be community colleges, current or former state teachers' colleges, and the like. These schools serve the academically marginal and would be better replaced by vocational training in high school and on-the-job training at work." In response to the claim that everyone learns *something* from his time at college, Mr. Henry replies, Maybe so: "But at what price? One hundred and fifty billion dollars is awfully high for deferring the day when the idle or ungifted take individual responsibility and face up to their fate. And the price is even steeper when the egalitarian urge has turned our universities . . . into soapboxes for hazy and tribalist [ideas]."

In a society that has surrendered to radical egalitarianism, education will naturally be a prime locus of anti-elitist sentiment. But, as Mr. Henry shows, the attack on elitism is hardly confined to the shenanigans of PC professors and their equivalents in elementary and secondary schools. The "foolishly embraced" idea that "self-fulfillment is more important than objective achievement" finds a responsive echo throughout American society. One indication of this is to be found in the much abused concept of "entitlement." Noting that the list of what people feel they are "entitled to" has "exploded exponentially" over the last few decades, Mr. Henry points out that the rise of the rhetoric of entitlement has been accompanied by a corresponding "erosion of personal responsibility." As late as the mid-1960s,

> it was generally accepted that welfare and other benefices from the state were not rights but charity, given voluntarily for the physical succor of the recipient and the moral succor of the donor. The sense of a voluntary transaction, one that might legitimately be terminated at any time, surely awakened at least some recipients to the awareness that they were ultimately responsible for their own fate. Once welfare became labeled a "right" or "entitlement," that change in rhetoric inevitably eroded the sense of personal duty to survive and improve.

The change has been a momentous one. For example, "where a generation ago people felt entitled to a chance at education, they now feel entititled to the credential affirming that they have completed a course of study regardless of their actual mastery." Elsewhere in society there is also a general

> decline in respect for technique and skill; . . . the equation of what is popular with what is good; the free rein given in scholarship, entertainment, and even journalism to magic, mysticism, miracles, mind-reading, and other alleged manifestations of the supernatural; the dumbing-down of journalism; and the emergence of a series of entertainment forms and home technologies that foster the tireless self-celebration of the peasantry for the mere fact of being alive.

This is a long and complex list. But Mr. Henry's main point is straightforward. The "missing element in every phase of American life," he argues, "is what used to be called rugged individualism." Genuine fairness included the freedom to strive, the opportunity to succeed, but also the possibility of failure. "Above all," Mr. Henry writes, "fairness is not the same thing as equality. . . . It is unfair to men and whites and children of privilege to hold their achievements suspect. It is unfair to women and blacks and the poor to create compensatory programs so pervasive that they can never know the full joy of having achieved something on their own. A fair society is one in which some people fail." This may sound like a harsh philosophy. In fact, it is infinitely more benevolent than one requiring that reality be systematically distorted in the interests of ideological purity.

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The two William Blakes

by Daniel Mark Epstein

In 1966, I arrived at college to discover that William Blake had become the patron saint of a revolution. Students in those days confused the poet Blake with certain drawings he had made of leonine prophets and Gods, old men whose beards and hair merged into one luxuriant mane, like the Lord in Blake's illustrations of the Book of Job, or Job himself, or the titanic Creator measuring out the world with calipers in the frontispiece to *Europe*. These images, popularized by poster art of the Sixties, hung alongside pyrotechnic pictures of the Beatles and the whiskered Allen Ginsberg and the incomparably hirsute Mr. Natural by R. Crumb. We imagined Blake as a wildman visionary, fashionably shaggy and fashionably mad, one of us, although 150 years dead.

Blake was so beloved and popular that rock stars set his lyrics to music. Professors fought over him. Eighteenth-century experts insisted he was by birth a brother of Cowper and Goldsmith, and that he belonged in their courses. The nineteenth-century scholars claimed Blake as their own, the first Romantic, and sat him before Coleridge and Wordsworth on their syllabi. With one foot in either century the author of the cryptic *Four Zoas* bestrode the English department of the 1960s like a great colossus, almost as popular among English majors as Shakespeare, who had a course all to himself.

Meanwhile Blake was being read where it mattered, not so much in the classroom as in the dormitory, on Volkswagen buses, and in meadows under the full moon. Students high on mescaline intoned Blake's Lambeth prophecies to each other, convinced that their favorite revolutionary had encoded the secret meaning of life in his allegories. It had something to do with the supremacy of imagination and much to do with the abrogation of reason. It was dangerous and exciting, like the ethics of Nietzsche and the aesthetics of Artaud. Madness was never more fashionable, and the romance of William Blake was bound up in the Platonic judgment of his inspired lunacy.

Thirty years after my first skirmish with Blake's prophetic books, I am revisiting Blake's life and work, in light of the new edition of the illuminated books published by the William Blake Trust and Princeton University Press.[1] It is a very strong light indeed that comes from these quarto volumes. They reproduce, plate by plate, Blake's

1 *Blake's Illuminated Books*, David Bindman, General Editor; The William Blake Trust/Princeton University Press. *Vol. 1: Jerusalem* (1991), edited by Morton D. Paley (302 pages, $75); *Vol. 2: Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1991), edited by Andrew Lincoln (209 pages, $59.50); *Vol. 3: The Early Illuminated Books* (1993), edited by Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick, and Joseph Viscomi (286 pages, $75); *Vol. 4: The Lambeth Prophecies* (forthcoming, 1995); *Vol. 5: "Milton a Poem" and the Final Illuminated Works* (1993), edited by Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi (286 pages, $65).

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hand-lettered verses and colored illustrations. Here are all the illuminated books, from *All Religions Are One* (1788) to *Jerusalem* (1820), exactly as they first appeared in Blake's print-shop. Princeton has also published a companion volume, *Blake and the Idea of the Book*, by the printmaker and scholar Joseph Viscomi.[2] The foremost authority on the technology behind the illuminated plates, he explains how they were made, printed, and colored.

These illuminated books, masterpieces of the book maker's art, answer crucial questions, especially about the poet's late, recondite allegories. They remind the poetry scholar that his Blake was first a visual artist, indebted to Raphael and Michelangelo, and second a writer beholden to Spenser and Milton. The monumental nude male who fills the title page of *Milton*, his muscular back to us, his right hand reaching into a whirlwind that cuts his lettered name in half, beckons the reader more enticingly than the poem's fifteen-line invocation to the muses.

Blake was a "multi-media" artist. The major illuminated books are the perfect repository of a vision Blake could not capture in the ragged net of his language. His formidable epics, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, were never meant to be appreciated in cold type. These are not narratives that play like Homer and Dante upon the ear, or in the mind's theater. Without Blake's radiant drawings to illuminate the darkness of his meandering texts, their meaning is all but lost.

No artist but the writer William Blake ever balanced word and image so delicately, so gracefully. In some books, such as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the word dominates. Here the letters are clear, the margins ample, and the verses airily spaced. In others, such as *Jerusalem*, the pages of crowded script are nearly impenetrable, as if deferring to the picture's pre-eminence. Blocks of language, walls of language washed with sky-blue, rose, and yellow watercolor, stand as sculptural rather than syntactical units, elements of design valued as much for their visual impact as for their development of the poem's argument.

For devoted poetry readers there are two William Blakes. There is sweet William, author of the *Poetical Sketches* (1783), *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789 and 1793), *The Book of Thel* (1789), *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), and a handful of crystalline lyrics preserved in notebooks which Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Basil Pickering purchased after Blake's death. Then there is mad, bad Willie, author of *The Four Zoas* (1803?), *Milton* (1810), and *Jerusalem* (1819), poems so incendiary, inscrutable, and ungainly that his best friends would not read them. The Lambeth prophecies (1793–95) fall somewhere in between.

To this day few scholars have pretended to read all the later works with anything like comprehension, let alone pleasure. The list includes Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom. It does not include Blake's early editor W. B. Yeats, or Algernon Swinburne and Alexander Gilchrist, his first critical biographers. Swinburne wrote of *Jerusalem*: "Seriously, one cannot imagine that people will ever read through this vast poem with pleasure enough to warrant them in having patience with it." And "It were a mere frenzy of discipleship that would undertake by force of words to make straight these crooked ways or compel things incoherent to cohere." A central issue in Blake scholarship—at least it is a question of abiding interest to the serious amateur—is just how sweet William became mad, bad, Willie; how the poet who wrote

> My silks and fine array
> My smiles and languished air
> By love are driven away . . .

waxed in the fullness of time to become author of a tortuous epic, the rising action of which consists in John Milton's spirit entering Blake's body by his left foot. If this is

2 *Blake and the Idea of the Book*, by Joseph Viscomi; Princeton University Press, 453 pages, $49.50.

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not madness, can any method be found in it?

The perennial dispute over Blake's sanity, which began in his lifetime, can never quite be put to rest. An artist's sanity is frequently a matter of personal opinion, and the condition of genius bordering upon madness is so fascinating that writers such as Poe and Plath owe much of their popularity to it. Blake's first, best biographer, Gilchrist, who interviewed the poet's friends, devotes a full chapter to the subject, "Mad or not mad?" Gilchrist recalls that in conversation "Blake would speak in the most matter-of-fact way of recent spiritual visitors." His letters are full of references to such extraterrestrial beings, angels, and spirits of the dead.

Blake was an unembarrassed mystic, a visionary in that very prosaic century, the age of Samuel Johnson, Edward Gibbon, and Edmund Burke. But that was only the beginning of his idiosyncrasy. He was also a republican, an enemy of monarchy during a period of intense anti-Jacobin sentiment, which during the Napoleonic wars rose to a panic. He was a Christian anarchist, an antinomian who despised organized religion in a nation devoted to the Church of England. In that strait-laced society Blake held radical opinions about sex, nudity, censorship, and women's rights.

To many readers of Blake, more important than any of these eccentricities of opinion is the strangeness of his progress as a writer, from the author of pellucid, profound lyrics and ballads to the creator of inscrutable "epics." Inconsistency in this case is not merely the hobgoblin of little minds, it remains the preoccupation of minds great and greater that have given full attention to Blake's *oeuvre*. And he has, from the 1860s until the present, attracted scholars of the highest caliber, including the incomparable Gilchrist, Rossetti, Swinburne, Yeats, S. Foster Damon, the indispensable Northrop Frye, and in recent years poet Kathleen Raine and E. P. Thompson. All make their case that the poet was not crazy. All take their time doing so, laundering the threadbare garment and hanging it out to dry. I am not going to repeat the various apologia. Instead I prefer to gather up a few details of Blake's life by way of accounting for the two Blakes we find before and after the turn of the century.

William Blake was born on November 28, 1757, in a corner house on a street now known as Broadwick, in Soho. He was the second of five children of James Blake, a prosperous hosier, and Catherine Harmitage, widow and heiress of Thomas Harmitage of St. James, a haberdasher.

Although the Blakes were "non-conformists," Catherine saw to it that her baby was christened in Christopher Wren's Palladian Church of St. James. Catherine and James were probably Baptists. The English historian E. P. Thompson, in his new book *Witness Against the Beast*, links the family to an antinomian, anti-Enlightenment sect, the Muggletonians. These dissenters, named after their prophet Lodowicke Muggleton, denied the trinity and followed Jacob Boehme's idea that God manifests Himself "by contrarieties in Creation."

Like most of the great English writers, William Blake was a bourgeois and a cockney. Unlike most, the precocious child had supportive parents who appreciated his strange gifts and made allowances for his peculiarities. There is some disagreement about the date of Blake's earliest vision. Alexander Gilchrist says that it was on Peckham Rye by Dulwich Hill, and Blake was ten. Rambling over hill and vale "the boy looked up and saw a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars." When he returned home with this story his father wanted to thrash him for telling a lie. His mother got him acquitted. Soon thereafter William ran into the house declaring he had seen the prophet Ezekial resting in the shade of a tree. James whipped him then, no doubt concerned that the child learn not to make a fool of himself.

One of the more picturesque recollections of Blake's childhood is how, on a summer morning, the boy saw angels walking in the dusty golden light among the haymakers as

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they swung their scythes. And according to a conversation between Blake and his wife quoted by Raymond Lister, the boy was only four years old when he first saw God. "You know dear," said Mrs. Blake, "the first time you saw God was when you were four years old, and he put his head to the window, and set you a-screaming."

The Blakes decided not to send the sensitive child to school, where he would be exposed to ridicule. Bright and curious, he learned to read and write at his mother's knee. The little boy began to draw as soon as his hand could hold a pencil. At ten he was sent to Mr. Pars's drawing school, the finest preparatory school for young artists in London. Blake's father bought him plaster casts of the Gladiator, the Venus de Medici, and models of the hand, arm, and foot so the student could continue his drawings at home. Later he gave his son an allowance to start a collection of prints to copy. In the days when Guido and the Caracci were all the rage, young Blake haunted the dealers' shops and auctions looking for masters of the cinquecento—Michelangelo and Raphael, and the great Northern Europeans Dürer and Heemskerck.

Between the age of eleven and twelve, Blake began to write poetry. Before the age of fourteen he wrote:

> How sweet I roam'd from field to field
> And tasted all the summer's pride,
> 'Till I the Prince of Love beheld
> Who in the sunny beams did glide!
>
> He show'd me lilies for my hair,
> And blushing roses for my brow;
> He led me through his gardens fair
> Where all his golden pleasures grow.
>
> With sweet May dews my wings were wet,
> And Phoebus fir'd my vocal rage;
> He caught me in his silken net,
> And shut me in his golden cage.
>
> He loves to sit and hear me sing,
> Then laughing, sports and plays with me;
> Then stretches out my golden wing,
> And mocks my loss of liberty.

Taken with a handful of other lyrics Blake wrote before he was grown, this "Song" puts him in the company of Pope, Rimbaud, and Dylan Thomas, child prodigies in an art that nearly precludes them. The poem's theme, presciently, is the spoiling of childhood's spiritual and creative liberty by that imperious spirit, Eros.

At age fourteen, Blake left Mr. Pars's drawing school for the engraver James Basire's workshop in Great Queen Street. This was a practical decision on the part of the boy's parents. As much as they might have liked to apprentice William to a painter, the premiums for such apprenticeships were exorbitant, and the return on their investment uncertain—few painters made a living. The less costly study with a well-known engraver promised not only a degree of artistic training, but a marketable skill to keep the wolf from the door.

When he saw that young William did not mix well with the other apprentices ("he was too simple and they too cunning" said Basire), the kind master sent Blake into Westminster Abbey to sketch the monuments Basire was hired to engrave. This practice inspired in Blake his life-long passion for the Gothic, for the spiritual in the arts, a taste for ancient excellences and eternal truths, which kept him well out of the current of fashion.

During his seven years with Basire, Blake wrote the poems published later in *Poetical Sketches*. When the apprenticeship was over he returned to his parents house. While working as an engraver for booksellers in 1780, Blake met the great sculptor and draftsman John Flaxman, then subsisting upon his designwork for Wedgwood. Flaxman got his young acquaintance piece-work designing tea and dinner services.

Blake's study and journey-work were disturbed in the spring of that year by the Gordon riots, the "No-Popery" demonstrations led by the mad agitator Lord George Gordon. Arising from a Protestant fury against

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the removal of civil restrictions from Catholics, the demonstrations escalated into an orgy of vandalism, plunder, and murder. Some forty thousand ruffians sacked half of London, burning the churches and homes of Papists. On the third day the rioters, drunk on triumph and stolen gin, set their sights upon secular targets—somebody pointed toward Newgate prison. Blake, on his way home that evening, found himself walking along a route the mob had chosen. Borne up in it, trapped in the throng, he was forced into its front rank. From there the poet witnessed the storming of the prison, and the release of three hundred prisoners. He watched the flames rise as the building was set to the torch. The civil authorities sought justice against the perpetrators of the riot, in "those black weeks when strings of boys under fourteen were hung up in a row to vindicate the offending majesty of the law." Blake might have been one of them had some drunken dragoon recalled his face in the crowd at Newgate, and reported him during those days of haphazard vengeance.

From this adventure the twenty-three-year-old poet learned something about the violence that can erupt in the name of religion, and the State's righteous wrath. Such lessons were not lost upon the author of *The Songs of Experience* or *All Religions Are One*. But they did not quite prepare him for his devastating conflict with authority in middle age.

Blake married Catherine Boucher in 1782. The pretty, dark-haired bride, of humble origins, could not sign the parish register but left an X as her mark. Biographers from Gilchrist to Mark Shorer have romanticized the childless marriage. They have canonized the wife who not only kept house but worked side by side with her husband in his shop. Blake taught her to read and write. According to some accounts he conversed with her as an equal. But Swinburne, for one, is skeptical: "Catherine Boucher deserves remembrance as about the most perfect wife on record. In all things but affection, her husband must have been as hard to live with as the most erratic artist or poet who ever mistook his way into marriage." Swinburne retails the story, true or false, "that once in a patriarchal mood he did propose to add a second wife to their small and shifting household, and was much perplexed at meeting on one hand with tears and on all hands with remonstrances."

Soon after Blake's marriage, his friend Flaxman introduced him to the "accomplished Mrs. Mathew," a celebrated bluestocking. The Reverend Henry Mathew's wife, she presided over a notable artistic salon. It is in her drawing room, with its antique furniture and painted windows, that we catch a glimpse of Blake in polite society.

The young artist has been invited to recite some of his lyric poems to the guests. After the port has been served, he remains standing as the others take their seats around the room. In his left hand he lightly holds the scrolled sheets of foolscap he will not unroll because he has got all of the songs by heart. His blue eyes flash, his lips quiver with excitement. With his large, round head and those wide, pale eyes; with his reddish golden hair standing out from his head on all sides like the rays of a halo; with his intense concentration and mischievous smile, the smooth-faced youth looks like a Raphael cherub, but too large for a boy, too small for a man. Eyes half-closed now he opens his mouth and sings the poems in the *a capella* fashion of a highland minstrel:

> When early morn walks forth in sober grey
> Then to my black-eyed maid I haste away;
> When evening sits beneath her dusky bow'r,
> And gently sighs away the silent hour,
> The village bell alarms, away I go,
> And the vale darkens at my pensive woe.

According to an eye-witness, one J. T. Smith, "his ear was so good . . . his tunes were sometimes most singularly beautiful, and were noted down by musical professors." What a pity those notes have been lost! Blake's singing delighted the company. They wanted to hear him again and again. And the poems so charmed Flaxman and the Rever-

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end Mathews that they paid for the printing of Blake's first book, *Poetical Sketches*, in 1783.

While Blake's poetry was more than welcome at those soirees, his opinions were not. According to that same source, the diarist Smith, "in consequence of his unbending deportment, or what his adherents are pleased to call his manly firmness of opinion, which certainly was not at all times considered pleasing by every one, his visits were not so frequent." Then they ceased altogether.

Soon we find the poet in the more congenial company of publisher Joseph Johnson. In his cramped upstairs rooms Johnson entertained men and women with radical opinions: republican sympathizers, critics of religion, William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine.

Blake followed events in France with enthusiasm. He was the only one of his circle to wear the *bonnet rouge*, that flashy symbol of liberty, equality, and fraternity, in broad daylight, running the risk of being thrashed or stoned by a Tory mob. Of course, after the days of the terror in September of 1792 Blake cast the red cap aside, never to wear it again. But to the end of his life Blake would call himself a "Liberty Boy" or "Son of Liberty." He would point to his forehead, laughing, insisting that being a revolutionary was not voluntary, but was a sort of congenital condition. "I can't help being one," he would tell his loyalist acquaintances, "any more than you can help being a Tory: your forehead is larger above; mine, on the contrary, over the eyes."

Two portraits of William Blake have come down to us; in both the poet is clean-shaven. The first, an oil painting by Thomas Phillips now in the National Gallery, is a somewhat idealized image of Blake at fifty. The broad-shouldered poet is shown seated, wearing a black cut-away jacket, white waistcoat, and neckcloth. His clothes are too small for him. He holds his arm across his body, posing his left hand lightly upon the right armrest of his chair, so that with the pen in his right hand he can finish drawing the cuff of his left sleeve. This Escher-like gesture does not absorb his attention—Blake's enormous eyes are fixed with spiritual intensity upon something, some vision, angel, or flying saucer well above the viewer's head and beyond the horizontal frame of the picture.

A more rapid and casual portrait of the man at sixty drawn by his young friend John Linnell shows the poet's round head in profile. Bald on top, with long wavy hair over his ears, old Blake looks a little like Benjamin Franklin as played by Bob Hope, surprised by a death's head somewhere off in the middle distance. There is an almost menacing intensity in the expression. In both the oil painting and the line-drawing Blake's eyes are not only large but bulging, suggesting a hyperactive thyroid.

Not to belabor the obvious, William Blake did not look like other people. He appeared to be bursting out of his skin. Though he was kind and gentle at heart, his aspect was disquieting to strangers. He was aware of it. His looks—so he believed—got him into trouble, the only real trouble he ever encountered in his long and largely peaceful life as an English citizen, Christian, and artisan.

> O why was I born with a different face?
> Why was I not born like the rest of my race?
> When I look, Each one starts!

These verses come from a letter dated August 16, 1803. They refer to Blake's scuffle with a private in the Royal Dragoons, which led to the poet's being tried for high treason in 1804. This central drama of Blake's middle age affirmed his worst fears about the State's power. The trial forever modified the manner of Blake's discourse, which retreated inexorably from mystification into silence.

Blake had left London in September of 1800. William Hayley, poet and country gentleman, invited him to take a cottage near his in the hamlet of Felpham, Sussex, by the sea. Hayley, a famous if mediocre writer, was an admirer of Blake's artwork and wanted him nearby to engrave the illustrations for Hayley's work in progress.

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"Encouraged perhaps by the prospect of a patron," says Gilchrist, the Blakes left Lambeth for the green cornfields of Sussex. He wrote to Flaxman (September 21, 1800):

> Mr. Hayley received us with his usual brotherly affection. I have begun to work. Felpham is a sweet place for Study, because it is more spiritual than London. Heaven opens here on all sides her golden Gates; her windows are not obstructed by vapours; voices of Celestial inhabitants are more distinctly heard, & their forms more distinctly seen . . .

And in a letter to his friend Thomas Butts two days later: "Work will go on here with God speed . . . I have begun to Work, & find that I can work with greater pleasure than ever."

And so it went for a year, two years, Blake engraving books and broadsides for Hayley, studying Greek and Hebrew, and still finding time to complete *The Four Zoas* and begin composing *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. He writes to Butts:

> I have in these three years composed an immense number of verses on One Grand Theme, similar to Homer's Iliad or Milton's Paradise Lost, the Persons and Machinery entirely new to the Inhabitants of Earth. I have written this Poem from immediate Dictation, twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time, without Premeditation & even against my Will; the Time it has taken in writing was thus render'd Non Existant, & an immense Poem Exists which seems to be the Labour of a long Life, all produc'd without Labour or Study.

No one knows which of the three epics Blake has in mind, or if in fact the three were not at the time a single unfinished poem. Blake was happy and prolific. "I see the face of my Heavenly Father; he lays his Hand upon my Head & gives me a blessing to all my works; why should I be troubled?"

But there was a snake in the Sussex garden, and the snake was none other than the well-meaning Hayley. It seems that for the proud author of the poem described above, Blake's patron was a little too . . . well, patronizing. We must remember that by the time Blake arrived in Felpham he had written and engraved *The Book of Urizen*, *Europe: a Prophecy*, *The Book of Los*, and *The Book of Ahania*. He had created the allegorical figures Urizen, Luvah, Tharmas, and Urthona to represent the fundamental aspects of human nature (reason, the emotions, the body, the imagination) and Los as the expression of the Creative Imagination. Blake's new mythology charged Art with a moral responsibility previously borne only by the Church and the law courts.

Blake believed that the human race had taken a wrong turn somewhere between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Led by Descartes, Locke, and Newton, men had sold their souls for the cold currency of reason. Now things were in a fearful muddle. There had passed a century of art that was materialistic and mechanical, unimaginative and soulless though ever so reasonable, Pope's dialectical verse essays and the mannerly vapidities of Thomas Gainsborough and Joshua Reynolds. Of Reynolds he wrote:

> This man was hired to Depress Art . . . Having spent the Vigour of my Youth & Genius under the Oppression of Sr. Joshua and His Gang of Cunning Hired Knaves Without Employment & as much as could possibly be Without Bread, The Reader must Expect to Read in all my Remarks . . . Nothing but Indignation & Resentment.

Of course this is all melodramatic—Blake was rarely out of work and never hungry—still it accurately represents his feelings.

To say that Blake took his art seriously leaves too much unsaid. No one had ever taken Art so seriously. In this he was the precursor of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce. For Blake, Jesus Christ was the universal imagination, and to be a true Christian was to participate enthusiastically in the life of that imagination. In *The Marriage of Heaven and*

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Hell he declared that "the worship of God is: Honoring his gifts in other men, each according to his genius, and loving the greatest men best: those who envy or calumniate great men hate God; for there is no other God." And Blake believed that the greatest men were the sublime artists.

So imagine the author of "The Tyger" and *The Book of Los* toiling away all day engraving illustrations for Hayley's doggerel, then burning the midnight oil transcribing the vatic fourteeners of *Milton*, and wanting an audience. He knocks on the gentleman's door. And Hayley, with a great show of indulgence and magnanimity in yielding his precious attention to the amateur, agrees to read a canto or two of Blake's new epic. Time passes, a few days, a week. At last when he can no longer avoid the subject, the Great Man clears his throat. Ever so politely, he informs his engraver that he has read the verses and found them not to his taste—too difficult, too elusive, too strained. The engraver might return to his plates with renewed vigor and confidence that the right gifts fall to the right man. He, Hayley, would write the poetry, and Blake should concentrate more on his . . . miniatures, miniature portraits. He is so clever at it, and all the company loves them, and there is a rich market; as a miniaturist Blake will never lack patrons . . .

By the spring of 1803 Blake had had enough of the sea breezes and birdsongs of Felpham. Convinced that Hayley was envious of his talents, Blake decided "to be no longer Pester'd with his Genteel Ignorance & Polite Disapprobation." He and his wife would return to London after the summer.

It is a pity he did not leave immediately. Before he could pack up his household and return to London, Blake would have to endure far worse than genteel ignorance and polite disapprobation.

William Blake looked up from his desk and cocked an ear. He heard men's voices in the garden. Blake peered out the cottage window and he did not like what he saw. It was a dragoon, one of the King's men quartered at the Fox Inn about fifty yards up the road.

Blake walked down into the yard to find Private Schofield at ease, propping a wall, in conversation with the gardener. Blake asked the soldier what he was doing there. Schofield said the gardener had invited him. Blake told the dragoon he knew nothing about that. As politely as possible he told Private Schofield he did not want any soldier in his garden. The soldier replied with some impertinence that raised the poet's temperature.

William Blake put aside politeness and ordered the dragoon to get out of his garden. Stiff-necked, the soldier crossed his arms—he refused to budge. Blake turned up the volume on his demand, and at this point Private Schofield threatened to knock out his eyes. He did not like the look of Blake's eyes, the way they pierced him. Schofield said some other things not repeatable here, "abominable imprecations & with some contempt for my Person," according to Blake, things he was afraid his wife might hear, for now she was coming out of the cottage to see what was going on.

"It affronted my foolish Pride," he wrote.

What happened next no one could have anticipated, not Blake's wife or the gardener, not Flaxman or Blake's biographers, certainly not the astonished Private Schofield. Blake took a quick step forward and seized the man's arm at the elbow. Surprised, Schofield could not twist away quickly enough to keep the poet from grabbing his other arm. With a strength inspired by fury, Blake pushed the foul-mouthed soldier before him through the gate, into the dust of the country road.

The dragoon, crimson with rage, stood in the roadway squaring off at the poet, threatening, taunting him. Blake snapped. He charged through the gate and, ducking and deflecting the soldier's wild punches, he got him again by the elbows and swung him around. Keeping Schofield's back turned to him, Blake drove him forward up the road. The noise brought out the neighbors who followed Blake as he pushed his captive all the way to the gate of the Fox Inn. There the

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parade was met by the landlord, and the landlord's wife and daughter, and another soldier, Trooper Cock, who was Private Schofield's friend.

These soldiers brought forth charges before a magistrate that Blake had uttered treasonable expressions such as "Damn the King, damn all his subjects, damn his soldiers, they are all slaves; when Bonaparte comes, it will be cut-throat for cut-throat, and the weakest must go to the wall; I will help him, etc. . . ." In the formal indictment Blake is slightingly called "a Miniature Painter" living in a coastal parish while "War was carrying on between . . . France and our said Lord the King." Blake was charged with "intending to withdraw the fidelity and allegiance of his said Majesty's Subjects from his said Majesty and encourage and invite as far as in him lay the Enemies of our said Lord the King to Invade This Realm."

Though Blake protested before the bench that all this was a "Fabricated Perjury," he was forced to find bail and stand trial for sedition in January of 1804. Thus the poet had the whole of autumn and part of the winter to worry over the outcome. He had returned to London. As Gilchrist has written, "those were hanging days," and with the Napoleonic wars raging abroad, the military was not to be trifled with. Innocent literary men and political theorists were being prosecuted for high treason. And protesters were going to the gallows in Ireland for offenses no worse than Blake's. His previous intimacy with Thomas Paine and others at Johnson's must have rested uneasily upon his memory, as some clever counsel for the prosecution might use the connection against him. During the last months of 1802 William and Catherine Blake lived in the valley of the shadow of death.

Though the presiding judge, the Duke of Richmond, took an instant dislike to the artist, the villagers and jurors were partial to him. Blake's neighbors testified that he was gentle and peaceable (which must have surprised Schofield). In cross-examining the accusors, Blake's attorney exposed their perjury.

The *Sussex Advertiser* reported that Blake was, "by the jury, acquitted; which so gratified the auditory that the court was, in defiance of all decency, thrown into an uproar by the noisy exultations."

Sixty years later an old man, a villager who as a child had gone to the trial to look upon the great Hayley, could remember nothing of it but Blake's flashing eye.

Great creative artists begin with a willful recognition of their own uniqueness, the sense that they are somehow set apart from the ordinary run of humankind. This may be as innocent as the pride one takes in a talent for figure drawing or counterpoint. Or it may make a youth as overbearing as Mozart, contemptuous as Villon, a bully or a bore. The artist's pride can fuel a megalomaniac like Salvador Dalí or Robert Lowell; it can smolder in extreme shyness as it did in Paul Klee and Emily Dickinson, or co-exist with feelings of inferiority, as we see in the lives of Van Gogh and Baudelaire.

The summary of Blake's life from childhood to middle age shows that this hosier's son had that sense of his own uniqueness, in spades. And it was nourished and encouraged (not to say coddled or indulged) right up until the day he left London for the seacoast in 1800. He had been a child prodigy whose precocity disarmed all who heard him. He was the apple of his mother's eye. When the sensitive child appeared too vulnerable to go to school with the rough neighbor boys, his parents devised a homeschooling program fit for John Stuart Mill. His juvenilia indicate a profound knowledge of Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Marlowe, Plato, and dozens of other classics. Books were costly—little William had all he wanted. When the boy manifested his talent for drawing, his father not only sent him to the best art school in London, he bought him plaster casts and etchings.

When his master Basire saw that the blue-eyed genius did not get along with the other apprentices, did he scold him? Did he call the young men to the board and make them work through their disagreements? No. He

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sent Blake out of the shop on his own into the twilight of Westminster Abbey, to cultivate his precious gifts, and brood, and become stranger than ever. The apprenticeship to Basire is probably the best thing that ever happened to him, because it gave Blake a marketable skill, a trade that grounded him and his art. His brief excursions into London salons and drawing rooms only reinforced that sense of himself which was at once Blake's greatest strength and worst weakness. At Mathews's he was worshiped like Orpheus and at Johnson's he was admired and feared as a firebrand.

Blake's wife, who had the same name as his mother, Catherine, likewise adored him. And they had no children to divide this Catherine's attention—he could flourish at the center of it even more gloriously than he had in his mother's home.

I see a pattern of robust narcissism here, and it goes a long way in explaining Blake's attitude toward an audience before and after the writing of the recondite *Milton*, the incoherent *Jerusalem*.

Blake's contribution to literature is contained in fewer than a hundred pages of short lyrics, profound and dazzlingly beautiful. If he had written nothing else after the age of thirty-five, we would remember him for these. But Blake's contribution to the life of the imagination and history of ideas has a larger, more amorphous foundation in the legend of the "mad" poet and his mysterious allegories.

The allegorical narratives begin with *Tiriel* and *The Book of Thel*, both engraved in 1789. They evolve into a unified mythology in the so-called Lambeth prophesies, *America*, *Europe*, *The Book of Urizen*, *The Song of Los*, *The Book of Los*, and *The Book of Ahania*, the last engraved in 1795. Inspired by *The Faerie Queen* and *Paradise Lost*, Blake wanted to create religious poems that would dramatize the human spirit's evolution from Creation to the Apocalypse.

I do not intend here to summarize or elucidate Blake's mythology, which has found a peerless interpreter in Northrop Frye. It is no discredit to Blake that Frye's essays on the poems in his *Fearful Symmetry* are often more interesting than the poems themselves. Suffice it to say that these narratives introduce a cast of allegorical figures which are not characters in the way that Milton's Satan is a character, or Spenser's Archimago. Blake's figures represent abstract principles without visible bodies or personalities. They are scarcely anthropomorphic titans and demiurges who weep and wail, rage and murder and create, interacting "heroically" but without real drama because we can see nothing human in them.

Blake's figures are symbols in a private intellectual algebra. We know from the context that Los is the Creative Imagination, the maker of all we see. Blake gives him a hammer and anvil for props. We know that his son Orc is the principle of Revolution and Prophecy, and that Urizen is his eternal enemy, the lawmaker, the conservator, the avenging conscience. In the Orc cycle, engraved 1793–95, Blake plots the history of the human spirit in terms of the struggle between Orc and Urizen. As a reaction to eighteenth-century rationalism, this is sensational. As poetry, the Orc cycle pushes Blake's lyric genius to the limit, and beyond, into the intergalactic vastnesses of the epic, where he does not belong.

And that is where we find him in the summer of 1803, after the disagreement with Hayley, and before his run-in with the King's soldier in Felpham. He writes that he has composed an epic "on One Grand Theme, similar to Homer's Iliad, or Milton's Paradise Lost." With specious humility, he explains: "I may praise it, since I dare not pretend to be any other than the secretary; the Authors are in Eternity. I consider it as the Grandest Poem that this World contains."

Now let it be witnessed, again and again, that William Blake was a first-rate draftsman and engraver, a great lyric poet, and arguably the greatest allegorical painter England has produced. But his most passionate advocate, in the most generous spirit, would never measure this artisan against Homer, Milton, or Spenser when it comes to the epic, the

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Grandest Poem. Blake's gifts—his genius for metaphor and analogy, his magnetic power of concision, his vowel music—all are standard equipment for the writing of metaphysical lyrics. The Lambeth prophesies, two hundred lines apiece, narrowly succeed as extended lyrics. To write an epic requires talents we now expect of the novelist: penetration in portraying character, a flair for drama and plotting, and the vision to create a world which, if not real, is yet believable in its own way. Blake had none of these talents. That he thought he could write an epic, and then believed he had written a great one, was the delusion of a proud and excitable spirit working in virtual isolation.

Who was there to set him straight? The wife he had taught her ABCs? Hayley, whom he despised? Hayley as much as told Blake his poem was a shambles, which only enhanced his opinion of it. He did not desire Hayley's approval, though he could not hide his annoyance at being denied it. Blake had orders from on high. He writes to Mr. Butts: "I am not ashamed, afraid, or averse to tell you what ought to be told, that I am under the direction of Messengers from Heaven, daily and nightly."

"I have very little of Mr. Blake's company," said Catherine Blake, "he is always in Paradise." Angels had been visiting the poet for many years. The first he mentions is the soul of his beloved younger brother, Robert. Robert studied drawing with William until his untimely death of fever in 1787. Blake took it hard. A year later Robert appeared in seraphic guise to his grieving brother, confiding to William the secret technique by which he was to create his illuminated books. (As Viscomi proves, he wrote backwards on the plates, like Leonardo.) Another angel, Joseph the sacred carpenter, imparted the secret of grinding and mixing his watercolors. Other "Messengers" appeared as he needed them. Some were souls of the dead like Milton, Moses, and Dante; others were wholly unfamiliar daemons and holy protectors who hovered about the poet's lamp, whispering into his ears as he wrote the epics. Evidently they did not have any patience with revision—Blake wrote in a white heat and never looked back.

We hear a great deal about these Messengers during the years at Felpham, and very little afterward. There is abundant evidence that Blake composed *Milton* and most of *Jerusalem* while living on the seacoast. Both books are dated 1804, although *Milton* was not printed until 1810 and *Jerusalem*'s hundred plates were not completed until 1820. We find a few references in *Jerusalem* to events that occurred in 1808 and 1812, but the poem was essentially complete when Blake began the engraving in 1804.

Evidently the angels did not return with Blake to London in 1804—not the angels of poetry. With twenty-three years left to live, Blake wrote no more of it, except for minor tinkering with *Jerusalem*, and a handful of bitter satiric verses, such as this one he never mailed to Hayley: "Thy friendship oft has made my heart to ache:/ Do be my enemy—for friendship's sake."

On October 23 of that year, he wrote Hayley an extraordinary letter, in a moment of exhilaration that biographers have long recognized as a turning point in Blake's creative life. He describes an epiphany. Suddenly, after visiting the Truchsession Gallery, "I was again enlightened with the light I enjoyed in my youth, and which has for exactly twenty years been closed from me as by a door and by window-shutters." The poet is emphatic about the number of dark years and the nature of the demon that has sabotaged his work.

> Delight! I have entirely reduced that spectrous fiend to his stations, whose annoyance has been in the ruin of my labours for the last passed twenty years of my life. He is the enemy of conjugal love and is the Jupiter of the Greeks, an iron-hearted tyrant . . . I speak with perfect confidence and certainty of the fact which has passed upon me. Nebuchadnezzar had seven times passed over him; I have had twenty . . . I was a slave bound in a mill among beasts and devils; these are now, together with myself, become children of light and liberty . . .

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> O the distress I have undergone, and my poor wife with me. Incessantly labouring and incessantly spoiling what I had done well.

He gives thanks to God that he pursued his course through darkness and has been restored "to the light of Art."

> He is become my servant who domineered over me, he is even as a brother who was my enemy. Dear Sir, excuse my enthusiasm or rather madness, for I am really drunk with intellectual vision whenever I take a pencil or graver into my hand, even as I used to be in my youth, and as I have not been for twenty dark, but very profitable years.

Scholars often quote these passages to show Blake's rejuvenation as an artist, which carried him through the amazingly prolific period 1805–1820, when he produced the magnificent plates for *Jerusalem*, his sublime illustrations of the Book of Job, and the *Canterbury Pilgrims*. Little comment has been made upon the mysterious "spectrous fiend" or the twenty years of darkness.

A cursory glance at the biography indicates that twenty years before 1804, Blake's father died, providing the poet with his first contact in the spirit world. The young poet set up a print shop in Broad Street with his brother Robert, and started writing the *Songs of Innocence*. About the time these poems were completed Robert died, becoming the advance guard of a platoon of "Messengers" that haunted the poet with increasing frequency until he left Felpham. It is my opinion that "the spectrous fiend" Blake mentions in his letter to Hayley is the muse of Poetry, and its attendant sin, Pride. It is his pride in the poetry that likens him to Nebuchadnezzar, who set up his golden image in the plain of Dura. Poetry and Pride obsessed Blake night and day, monopolized his genius for twenty years, until he exorcised the demons at Felpham in writing the final epics, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. His trial for sedition in 1804 made Blake confront his demon pride in a public forum, to see it reflected in his accusors' eyes.

There is so little joy in the poetry he wrote from 1794 until 1804, we may rejoice with Blake in his putting that spectrous fiend behind him. It was a hard master. The Lambeth prophecies, *The Four Zoas* (which contains superb passages), *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, each in its way is a cry of the heart, a testament of pain suffered by an innocent soul under the grinding wheels of the Enlightenment. For despite his heroic indignation and his arcane knowledge, Blake remained a refractory innocent, incorruptible and hermetic. Nowhere is this so evident as in the last poems, which he offers to the public grudgingly and from a misty eminence, *noli me tangere*; it is clear he would prefer an audience of seraphim and cherubim for his epics. Until now he has had little else.

The greatest contribution of the Princeton facsimiles is that they have made *Milton* and *Jerusalem* accessible in the only form Blake ever wished to present them. Insofar as there is a plot line to *Milton*, you may gather it from analyzing the paintings. On the first page, a red comet blazes through the sky above the nude figures of a man and a woman. The comet trailing yellow fire is the form Milton will take on his descent to earth. In Plate 8 we see Enitharmon, Los's wife, the figure of Spiritual Beauty, as "an aged Woman raving along the Streets," and five pages later Milton is pictured in a glorious sunburst as the risen Christ, naked head to foot, having cast off the covenants of the old dispensation as well as materialism's rotten rags. On the next page we see Milton in his comet-form entering Blake by his left foot. And in the following plate Milton reaches across the Arnon River to struggle with bearded Urizen, whose arms rest upon the tablets of the law. The context shows that the Arnon symbolizes the female genital tract. Milton's hair is close-cropped like that of "Samson shorn by the Churches." On a hill above Urizen's head are five muses who represent the senses. The painting is captioned with a single line, "To Annihilate the Self-hood of Deceit & False Forgive-

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ness," and Milton's right foot meaningfully divides the word "Self-hood" at the hyphen.

If the poem remains incomprehensible to most readers, the pictures are not. Beautiful in themselves, their allegorical significance often can be gleaned from casual reference to the text. In using the words to interpret the paintings a reader inevitably gains an appreciation of the poem's figures and themes. Helpful lines are often prominently placed, at the top or bottom of a page or directly under or over an image, as in the facing Plates 41 and 42. There the mysterious figures in a full-page illustration are identified at the top of the next page as Milton and his female emanation, Ololon.

The crowning achievement of Blake's life as a painter may be found in *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*. Until recently I did not realize that only one colored volume of Blake's masterpiece exists, the only complete copy engraved in his lifetime. It is now in the collection of Paul Mellon. From the famous frontispiece, Los as the night watchman with his lantern entering Death's Door, to the hundredth plate, the nude trio of Los, his Spectre, and the lovely earth-mother Enitharmon, we are held captive in a theater of giants, fairies, monsters, gods, and goddesses as only Blake might imagine, and as no artist since the cinquecento could have drawn them. The pictures wholly convey the poem's emotion, and they go a long way toward illuminating its meaning.

To use Swinburne's phrase, it would be "a mere frenzy of discipleship" that would move one to try and unravel the argument of this crabbed poem. It is divided into four parts. Broadly, and with a nod to Northrop Frye, I submit that the first part is a meditation upon the Fall of Man, and how the visionary may view human potential as a sleeping giant. The second part considers humanity under Old Testament law as opposed to the dispensation of the New Testament. Part Three shows the conflict between Christ and Deism. And Part Four evokes the Apocalypse and the final epiphany of the Antichrist, the triumph of the Female Will. With its mingling of past and present, transmigration of souls, and shifting geography, *Jerusalem* illustrates the imagination's power over the world of experience.

In the ninth plate, naked Albion lies supine, inverted, his feet huge upon the yellow horizon between two enormous pentangular stars. The five daughters of Zelophehad (the senses) gather to mourn him. In Plate 37, Albion "in sick pallid languor" is received into the arms of the merciful Saviour, under a palm tree which is the symbol of Christ's entry into Jerusalem. Lower down the same page, a horrid red bat-winged spectre with a reptilian head hovers over the lovely recumbant body of Jerusalem as she lies on a bier floating over the blue-gray Sea of Time and Space. Blake's figures in motion and repose are full-bodied, sensuous, muscular as high renaissance prototypes; the pictures are all glowing with pastel color, vibrant with life.

Like Blake's lyric poems, these paintings are a pleasure at first sight and inexhaustible fountainheads of meaning.

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"A real inferno": the world of Christina Stead

by Brooke Allen

The Australian-born novelist Christina Stead is an author whose reputation perpetually hovers somewhere between apotheosis and oblivion. As a novelist, she was one of those unfortunates whom critics admire in the abstract but often find distasteful or harsh in reality. She never achieved a popular or even a real critical success; during her lifetime she complained, with justification, that each new novel was greeted with cries of disappointment by reviewers, who accused it of not measuring up to her earlier books—books that themselves had all too often met with indifference, incomprehension, or hostility.

One of her publishers said that "Christina Stead is a writer who makes absolutely no concessions to the reader." This is true, and the result was that at no time during her life or beyond it could Stead be even remotely considered a popular writer. But her talent, raw and undisciplined as it undoubtedly was, has proved impossible to dismiss. Beginning in 1955 with Randall Jarrell's famous essay on *The Man Who Loved Children* in *The New York Times*, a handful of influential writers have urged the public to take notice of this largely ignored artist. While most of her books are out of print at any given time, publishers, ever hopeful, continue to put out new editions of the better-known and less "difficult" ones: this year Henry Holt is republishing *The Man Who Loved Children*, *I'm Dying Laughing*, and *The Little Hotel*. Holt is also bringing out a comprehensive biography by Hazel Rowley, the first that has been written.[1]

But the ranks of Stead fans are unlikely to swell greatly, however hard her admirers try to share their enthusiasm. As many have pointed out, her prose is inaccessible to the casual reader—repetitive, verbose, often precious. At the same time Stead is insufficiently pretentious to appeal to the intellectual snob. She rejected the more self-conscious tricks of the second-string modernist, and while she was plainly influenced by Lawrence, Joyce, and Stein, the nineteenth-century masters—Balzac, Stendhal, Dickens, Thackeray, Goethe, Nietzsche, Strindberg, and many others—were really more important to her aesthetic. Clifton Fadiman, Stead's onetime editor and a lifelong admirer, knew that most readers would never swallow Stead whole. "Her humor is savage, her learning hard to cope with, her fancies too furious. Like Emily Brontë, she has none of the proper bearing, the reassuring domestic countenance of a 'lady author.'"

In the American literary climate dominated for so many decades by the stylistic dogma of Hemingwayesque simplicity, Stead's all-over-the-map excess was viewed with puzzlement if not active annoyance, and Stead herself, much as she desired at least a modicum of popular recognition and the finan-

1 *Christina Stead: A Biography*, by Hazel Rowley; Henry Holt, 646 pages, $37.50.

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cial rewards that accompany it, never even paid lip service to middle-highbrow tastes: "That brainless pamphlet of monosyllables!" she raged when her publishers suggested that she write more in the style of Steinbeck's latest best seller. When she edited her work she might throw things away, but by throwing away she emphatically did not mean "what is called 'paring to the bone.'" Her own style was distinctly unfashionable.

> The sensuality, delicacy of literature does not exist for me [she once wrote]; only the passion, energy and struggle, the night of which no one speaks, the creative act: some people like to see the creative act banished from the book—it should be put behind one and a neatly-groomed little boy in sailor-collar introduced. . . . But for me it is not right: I like each book to have not only the little boy, not very neat, but also the preceding creative act. . . . Most of my friends deplore this: they are always telling me what I should leave out in order to have "success." But I know that nothing has more success in the end than an intelligent ferocity.

The execution of such a credo virtually demands an anti-naturalistic style, and while Stead's prose is not exactly what most people call "experimental," it was also not what mid-century readers, saturated in Hemingway/Steinbeck minimalism, thought of as realistic. Stead saw herself as serving psychological rather than literal truth, hence her practice of making all her characters far more articulate than their real-life models could possibly be. Marpurgo, the cosmopolitan lace-merchant in *The Beauties and the Furies*, speaks in a fashion which we should find hideously affected in a real person—nevertheless, he remains sympathetic to the reader: "Humidity height is bad for the lesion: I was born for the nocturnes, the chiaroscuro, but a soggy lung makes indwelling constant, for relief, sustenance, it insists on the dry fresco of midday." One could criticize this kind of stylistic liberty at length, even mock it, but Stead's own words of justification ought first to be considered:

> My purpose, in making characters eloquent, is the expression of two psychological truths; first, that everyone has a wit superior to his everyday wit, when discussing his personal problems and the most depressed housewife, for example, can talk like Medea about her troubles; second, that everyone, to a greater or lesser extent, is a fountain of passion, which is turned by circumstances of birth or upbringing into conventional channels.

If Stead saw her characters as fountains of passion, it is because she knew herself to be one. As a plain, unloved Australian schoolgirl she saw herself as a Nietzschean heroine; as a lonely elderly woman she concocted a romantic "past" for herself and almost succeeded in making herself believe that she was an object of sexual desire to the most glamorous men of her acquaintance. Speaking of Louisa Pollit, Stead's alter-ego in *The Man Who Loved Children*, Randall Jarrell pointed out that "it is ugly ducklings, grown either into swans or into remarkably big, remarkably ugly ducks, who are responsible for most works of art." Christina Stead was fated to become one of those big, ugly ducks. To her credit, she had the courage to acknowledge her passionate nature rather than set it into "conventional channels," though she was often humiliated and made to look ridiculous for her sexual aggression.

It is not only in her two autobiographical novels, *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) and *For Love Alone* (1944), that Christina Stead fictionalized herself and the people she knew. All of her novels were based on real people, the cruelest portraits of all, the real "monsters," on people who had had reason over the years to consider her a good friend. Her technique of turning life into fiction was startlingly rudimentary. She would reproduce her model's speech patterns, appearance, life circumstances exactly; she even transcribed their letters verbatim. Stead's novels can in effect be read as a chronicle of her life. Her lifelong tirade against the libel laws was hardly disinterested.

Though she spent her first twenty-six years in Australia (she was born in 1902), it

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is doubtful whether Stead in later life felt "Australian," and it is equally doubtful whether Australia liked to consider her a native daughter. Stead was too European and too intellectual. She made her home abroad, and with few exceptions she set her novels there, too. The Australian intelligentsia had always suffered from what one writer memorably termed "cultural cringe," an attitude both deferential and defensive toward European cultural products and institutions. The pull of London, Paris, and New York had stripped Australia of many of her best artists: during Stead's childhood, Miles Franklin moved to America, and Henry Handel Richardson, the most important Australian writer of the period, had been living in Europe for years. As an expatriate, Stead was resentfully branded "un-Australian," a label that was to color her reputation in her native country for the rest of her life.

Stead's childhood, described unforgettably and almost literally in *The Man Who Loved Children*, was a bitterly unhappy one. Her father, David Stead, was a self-educated naturalist who eventually became the General Manager of the State Trawling Industry and co-founder of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia. Stead characterized him as "Huxley-Darwin reasonable-rational nature-agnostic mother-of-all-things-fresh-air-panacea eclectic-socialist universal-peace-manhood suffrage-and-vegetarianism of the English breed, inheriting from the eighteenth century age of light and Jean-Jacques . . ." David was a strange combination of atheist and Puritan, allowing no tobacco or alcohol, no kissing, dancing, or embracing in the home. Christina's mother, Ellen Butters, died when her daughter was two, and David then married Ada Gibbins, a delicate girl from a faded-genteel background, totally unsuited to the life of poverty and squalor the Stead family eventually descended to. Before her marriage, she had never learned anything but "water-color-painting, embroidery, and the playing of Chopin."

> My stepmother did not like me, very natural, as I was the kind of child only a mother could love and then probably with doubts: her treatment of me was dubious. Sometimes servants thought I was my father's illegitimate child, at other times, they fancied I was an orphan on my stepmother's side: friends who came to the house took me aside and told me what I owed the kind people who had taken me in.

But while Stead obviously despises the furious, impotent Henny Pollit, Ada's representative in *The Man Who Loved Children*, she retains, too, a certain amount of sympathy for her, trapped as she is in a hated union. It is for the father, Sam, that Stead reserves the full force of her hatred. Of all Stead's monstrous characters, Sam is the greatest monster, because he is the most supreme egotist. Other people, especially his own children, have no independent life for Sam; he sees them only as the very palest reflections of himself. He loves little children because he can be their god, and he forces his way into the very center of their small lives, tirelessly organizing games and fantasies. He speaks to them in a playful dialect, a cross between Uncle Remus and Artemus Ward—a dialect that eventually enrages the reader as Sam uses it to deflect every challenge and confrontation.

Sam is less fond of older children, children who have reached the age of dissent, and *The Man Who Loved Children* is in large part an account of the conflict between Sam and the adolescent Louisa. Louisa is brilliant, angry, and powerless. Her every assertion of intellectual independence is annexed by Sam into his own story, her every experience is made somehow less authentic than his own.

> "You cannot appreciate what I mean and will not for years to come, perhaps never. My sorrows, while all the time I was struggling upward, were more than man should bear."
>
> "I had sorrows too," she piped up.
>
> "I know, Looloo, I know," he said hastily, squeezing her hand. "We are close to each other: you are nearly of an age to begin to understand me."

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As Louie makes her strikes for independence, Sam becomes cruel, even sadistic, in his efforts to retain her as his satellite, prying among her things, forcing her to read her diaries aloud, ridiculing her appearance—"You'll find your place in the world, Looloo, but whatever we eventually find in that mountain of fat, it isn't going to be a Pavlova!" Louie, meanwhile, who sees herself as Beatrice in *The Cenci*, bides her time, plans her escape, and keeps in mind Nietzsche's exhortation to throw not away the hero in her soul—for within the unlikely person of this tubby schoolgirl is a Nietzschean heroine, as she proves at the end of the book, when her achieved act of will brings the Pollits' untenable life to a sort of resolution.

Clifton Fadiman wrote about Sam that "you're ready to scream at him as if he were not a character in a book but a man in your living room"—somewhat in the manner of the characters in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. This infuriating but powerful effect is achieved partly through force of repetition, a technique Stead always used to an unorthodox degree. In all of her novels she treads a very fine line between the power of controlled reiteration and the diffusion caused by an ill-disciplined unwillingness to edit.

What Stead achieved with Sam Pollit was a character who is at once unique and universal: however different he is from one's own parents, he still represents the abstract notion of Parent. This is because Stead penetrated the secret that egotism is an essential condition of parenthood, that all parents are wounded to the heart to think that their children have an emotional and intellectual life independent of them; some parents, like Sam, never accept the existence of that life at all. This universality is why *The Man Who Loved Children* has survived where another book, *I'm Dying Laughing*, equally interesting and well-written, is hardly known. The former is a critique of family life as memorable as *The Way of All Flesh*; the latter is very much of a particular historical moment, and fatally inscribed within it.

At the end of *The Man Who Loved Children* the adolescent Louie runs away from home forever. The young Christina Stead did not make such a clean break. Despite an excellent record at Sydney Girls' High School, which she left early in 1920, she did not have sufficient Latin to work for a B.A.. She could have entered university for a science degree but she associated lady-scientists with spinsterhood, a fate that she dreaded: marriage, which provided love, sex, and respectability, she saw as indispensable. As a result she trained for teaching, a profession that turned out to be horribly uncongenial to her.

Teresa Hawkins, the Christina-figure in *For Love Alone*, also trains as a teacher only to realize that the profession was an "illness to which she was condemned for life, until she was sixty, when a woman is not a woman." Teresa escaped this fate, as did Christina, who after literally breaking down with anxiety took a secretarial course and fell in love with a young lecturer at the University: Keith Duncan, a radical economist. Duncan left Sydney for England to study at the London School of Economics, and Christina eventually decided to follow him there, though her physical passion for him was hardly returned. Her decision was based not only on her love for Duncan but on her disgust at her life in Australia. She felt her position as a thinker and as an unattached woman to be anomalous within the conventional Sydney middle class, and she had no wish to join Bohemia.

> There's a glamour of a diabolic, miserable sort attached to wandering, unhappy, uneasy, unkind rebel sons; but what about daughters—daughters who will not conform have no glamour, respect or love: what they have in mind interests no-one. They have no position in society—and what man will ever marry them?

Stead arrived in London in 1928. England had not recovered from the postwar depression, London was overcrowded, and Stead was faced with the unpleasant possibility of not being able to find work. She

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took almost the first job offered her, that of secretary in a grain exchange business, Strauss & Co. The Managing Director was Alfred Hurst, a colorful, cynical user Stead was to portray as the central figure of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (1948); the Associate Manager was a short, energetic New Yorker named William Blech. She got on well with Blech, but for the moment was too preoccupied with Keith Duncan to take a real interest.

Like many of Stead's books, *For Love Alone* is motivated by a desire for revenge—in this case for revenge on Keith Duncan, who hurt and rejected her. Stead has her heroine, Teresa Hawkins, suffer torments of unfulfilled sexual longing. It is for the honest and insistent evocation of female sexual desire that *For Love Alone* is chiefly remarkable, for in the literature of the Forties the fact of such desire was generally acknowledged only tacitly if at all. Stead herself remained a virgin until the age of twenty-six, at which point she reckoned she had spent twelve years in perpetual sexual agony. Her ire at Duncan was largely due to his technique of teasing while withholding actual sex. He continued to withhold, and the ultimate satisfaction of her desires came from an unexpected quarter.

Bill Blech had long been interested in his intelligent employee. He had been married for nine years, but he and Mollie, though not actually separated, were definitely drifting apart, and it was in Stead rather than his wife that Bill found a woman with whom he could share all his interests. Bill was a new sort of person for Stead: cosmopolitan and brilliant, with a photographic memory and many interests. He had been a Communist since the Bolshevik Revolution. After he had repeatedly declared his love, Stead gave in to his wishes and they moved to Paris, where they both worked at the Travelers' Bank, a private American bank dealing in stock and commodity securities. Bill promised that they would soon be married; in fact, it would be twenty-three years before the implacable Mollie allowed a divorce. The woman who longed for nothing so much as marriage would be denied that dream until it was almost too late to matter.

It is not wholly surprising to discover that different though they were, Bill Blech and David Stead did have significant similarities. Both men were autodidacts and polymaths, charming extroverts who dominated the conversation and did a certain amount of showing off. Christina Stead's childhood and youth had been molded by a domineering man, and it is perhaps inevitable that in spite of her definitive break from her father she soon found a man of the same type to mold her future. But she was lucky, or wise, in her choice: Bill was a genuinely kind person who loved Christina and was faithful to her for the rest of his life. Bill disappointed her on the marriage front, but he was the one man who gave her what she craved throughout her life: romantic love.

Fadiman reflects that "in retrospect, Bill seems to me now, though a remarkable man of high energy and trenchant wit, to have been cast in a pattern one met frequently in the Thirties. Horace Liveright, Maxwell Bodenheim, Ben Hecht and many others typified it: lively minds flawed by a vein of exhibitionism . . ." Stead was dazzled by Bill's energy and by his intellect; he began her political education and his Marxist world-view soon became her own. Stead had grown up committed to the Australian Labour tradition, and had been exposed to socialist ideas through Keith Duncan; now she became an out-and-out Communist and a Stalinist, a position she would never abandon. Her novels, though never overtly political, all had political themes and points of view—even the highly autobiographical ones. But to what degree can Stead be classified as a "political novelist"? In a 1965 article in *The Nation*, Jose Yglesias claimed that Stead's Marxist point of view kept her from recognition and popular success, but, though it is true that as a known Communist her books did not easily find publishers during the Forties and Fifties, these same books' "Marxist point of view" is in fact hardly evident to the casual reader. Stead's books are only political insofar as she

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saw life itself as inherently political, and relations between human beings as being firmly conjoined with, and functions of, economics and power. Her novels contain neither dogmas nor solutions; there are many villains but no heroes, in marked contrast with the fictional formula of socialist realism. If Yglesias could say "Thank God, Christina Stead is not a fashionable writer," then we can also thank God that she was not a truly revolutionary writer either: the truths of human life were far too various to be so simply told.

In London in 1928 Stead had begun her first novel, which was to become *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, a rather grim chronicle of struggling workers in the depressed Sydney of the Twenties. The book, which was poetic and anti-realistic, was turned down by several publishers before Peter Davies, a young London publisher, accepted it on the condition that she not only revise it but produce another, more conventional, novel that he could publish before *Seven Poor Men*. Stead eventually settled down to produce a tale cycle, told by a wide variety of narrators in different narrative genres. The result was *The Salzburg Tales*, which she wrote quickly and with mastery: "In terms of technical and imaginative brilliance," Hazel Rowley writes, "she would never surpass this early book." *The Salzburg Tales* was published in early 1934, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* ten months later to negative reviews: the pattern of comparing Stead's new book unfavorably with its predecessor had begun.

The swift sequence of political disasters in the Thirties caught Blech and Stead in a strange double life. On the one hand Blech was making his own living in the most morally dubious arena of capitalist competition: the Travelers' Bank was being badly misrun, with a series of bad speculations, and both Blech and Stead, as his secretary, were heavily implicated in illegal covering operations that the director, Peter Neidecker, cooked up. On the other hand they were Communists, during a time when it had become a matter of integrity to declare one's faith. Stead and Blech made their friends among the writers for *The Daily Worker* and *The Left Review*. In 1935, with Moscow's initiation of the Popular Front, Stead attended as secretary to the English delegation the First International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, an anti-fascist rally that encompassed the broadest spectrum of left-wing intellectuals. She expressed her far-left sympathies in a statement on the congress published in *The Left Review*: younger writers, she wrote, must "give up their poetic solitudes and soft self-probings to study worldly subjects, enter the political arena, take lessons from workmen and use their pen as a scalpel for lifting up the living tissues, cutting through the morbid tissues, of the social anatomy."

But while she longed to prove her own mettle by writing a revolutionary novel, it turned out that ideology and art were not so easily blended. In 1935 she began a novel based on her experiences in international banking. Eventually entitled *House of All Nations*, the book was a sprawling, documentary novel along the lines of Dos Passos's *42nd Parallel*, describing the goings-on at an international banking house closely modeled on the Travelers' Bank. Stead's intention was to contrast the corrupt capitalists with an ideal socialist hero. But the story took on a life of its own, and to Stead's dismay, Rowley writes, "somehow the three Marxists in *House* had turned out to be floundering characters, compared with the energetic moneymakers." This was especially upsetting since *The Beauties and the Furies*, which was published in 1936, was itself being criticized as morally vacuous. Stead was wounded by Dorothy Van Doren's review in *The Nation*, which held that the novel was "without virtue, seriousness, morality."

This expresses a rather narrow view: *The Beauties and the Furies* is without morality only insofar as its characters are so. It is in fact a sharp criticism of bourgeois notions of passion and morality, as exemplified in the lives of a married Englishwoman and the young man with whom she has fled to Paris. Oliver and Elvira see themselves as creatures

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of romance, but in fact they enact a dreary melodrama devoid of love, passion, or risk. Elvira passively allows her future to be decided by her lover and her husband; she is "a monster of indecision: there was something grand and frightening about a life so involuntary." Oliver, who dithers from woman to woman while Elvira recovers from an abortion alone in a hotel, is a "flabby soul . . . ragged and inharmonious." Eventually of course Elvira goes back to her husband Paul, for "she would have been very lonely and aimless in life if she had not been married." Paul's cousin Sara, who loves him but must make way for Elvira, shows the reader human life as Stead herself so often saw it:

> Sara, looking at the people standing at the bus-stop and on the boulevard seats, and at those visible through the glass screen of the cafe, thought she saw the scatterings of a population of Saint-Sebastians, of twisting torsos, slightly agonised, with briars twining round them. . . . They were lonely as she was: they were perhaps nearly all just losing their lovers, or longing for one hopelessly, alone in the world, feeling they were missing everything. How can a whole world miss everything?

Stead and Blech had recently resumed their wanderings in unhappy circumstances. Blech had resigned from the bank in 1935, aware of Neidecker's illegal activities and unwilling to take part in them any longer. Two months later, the bank closed and Neidecker absconded to New York; Blech was advised to flee the country. He and Stead sailed to the United States, where they stayed a year, and for reasons of security he changed his name permanently to William Blake.

Simon & Schuster brought out *House of All Nations* in 1938, to reviews that were enthusiastic—with reservations. Alfred Kazin summed up critical opinion when he said that "Miss Stead is so much bigger than her novel, that she will need a stream of novels to shelter her fully, for no one novel can hold her at this point." The book did not make money for Stead, partly, perhaps, because the publishers unwisely limited the edition. Then, in 1939, Stead began to plan *The Man Who Loved Children*. She was inspired to consider writing about her own life after reading the autobiography of, of all people, Lady Margot Asquith. But revisiting her own childhood proved unexpectedly traumatic. Typically Australian in this area if in no other, she "was uncomfortable with self-revelation," Rowley writes, and "she and Blake were both fiercely impatient with what they regarded as the self-indulgence of popular psychology." She had until now refused to confront her painful early years. After finishing the novel she admitted that it had "demanded to be written," and that in writing it "it was as if I escaped from jail, although it may seem savage and mean to others."

The first months of the war saw Stead and Blake dancing back and forth with the wavering Party line (though Stead herself was not a member of the Communist Party and Blake was one for only fifteen months) following the shock of the Nazi–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact and later the German invasion of Russia. Stead, as usual, followed Blake's lead in upholding the revolutionary necessity of whatever actions were taken by the Stalin government. But she continued to find it impossible to write ideologically correct proletarian literature, and after *The Man Who Loved Children* (which, again, was not a commercial success, partly because it got lost among the larger events of 1940) she embarked upon *For Love Alone*.

Stead's years in the United States included, in 1942, a short stint in California. She worked as one of several writers on *Madame Curie* and *We Were Expendable*, but it was obvious that neither she nor Bill, who had himself embarked on a writing career, would make a real success there. Their stay, however, was not wasted, for it provided Stead with a marvelous insider's view of Hollywood radicalism. Many of Hollywood's writers were Communists, and they formed

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a community of sorts—but as with every other group in Hollywood, the Communists were rigidly stratified according to earning power. It was the $10,000-a-week men, like John Howard Lawson (later jailed as one of the Hollywood Ten), who made the rules, officially interpreted the Party line, and took it upon themselves to offer "constructive criticism" to the community's other Party members, while $175-a-week women like Stead "counted for nothing."

Of all these Hollywood Communists, with their luxurious houses and lavish parties, one of the most colorful was Ruth McKenney, famous as the author of *My Sister Eileen*. McKenney made money effortlessly by turning out corny, small-town-America humor, but she longed to be a "serious" writer. Stead, dazzled by McKenney's sheer vitality as well as her intelligence, became good friends with her and her husband, Richard Bransten. Bransten and McKenney were eventually expelled from the Party; the story of their apostasy and downfall fascinated and horrified Stead, and they became the subjects of *I'm Dying Laughing*, probably her best book along with *The Man Who Loved Children*.

I'm Dying Laughing was not published in Stead's lifetime. She became overwhelmed with the drafts and revisions, which she lugged around with her for years, apparently incapable of pulling the book into shape. She also, perhaps, felt that this time she had gone too far in courting accusations of libel, for it would have been obvious to anyone who knew Bransten and McKenney that they were "Stephen Howard" and "Emily Wilkes." But the final version of the novel, published in 1986 after being painstakingly pieced together by Stead's literary executor, is an astonishing piece of work: a treatise on political commitment and corruption, on greed, on egotism, and on money, it is, finally, a tragedy, though often a wildly funny one. Emily Wilkes rivals Sam Pollit as Stead's greatest monster. Like Sam, she is driven by greed, but where Sam's insatiable ego craves admiration, Emily is greedy for life—for experiences, travel, knowledge, food, drink, children. More, more, more: she is Gargantua in the form of a fat, noisy, attractive American woman, "all coloured solid flesh, like a circus horse, her hair full of man-made curls." Her sins are venial rather than deadly, but she is brought down by her husband, the passive and dissatisfied scion of a rich American family, a man who in revulsion from his upbringing has become a Communist but who literally cannot live without a substantial private income. Emily wastes her own talent on the lowbrow but lucrative "Toonerville Tales," supporting an enormous household of children and servants, not to mention Stephen's and her own expensive tastes. In this book Stead brutally said everything there was to say about limousine liberals many years before the term came into circulation. Emily and Stephen talk revolution, but they gorge at the Tour d'Argent and mock their friends who dine in cheap restaurants; they exalt the worker, but bring up their son to be "like the English *grands seigneurs*."

Inevitably the Howards, who grow ever more spoiled and voracious, sell out. Stephen is simply pathetic in political exile: "If I lost the Party I'd have nothing. I wouldn't know where to go, where to look. I can't live without the Party. I've built my life, my philosophy, my affections, too, on it." But Emily is destroyed not by her fall from political favor but by her real fall from grace, her betrayal of all her principles. Grotesque, outrageous, "terrible" in the French sense of the word, she is both tragic and ridiculous, a fit heroine for a novel thematically so complex and demanding. "Nothing inhuman is alien to me," she quips.

In 1947 Stead and Blake returned to Europe after nine years in New York. They were relieved to escape the Hoover investigations and initially enthusiastic about being in Europe again, but in fact the departure from New York marked the end of the happy period of Stead's life. From now until Blake's death they would be continually on the move, living either in hotels or in uncomfortable and inconvenient flats, usually

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unable to find work—not an uncommon position for declared Communists at that time. Though she continued to write, Stead no longer allowed herself to hope for commercial success, happy if she could scrape a pittance from her writing; she even took extra work in the office of a hospital and contemplated going out to work as a domestic. She and Blake slaved at badly-paid literary hack-work: with both of them laboring full-time over editing and articles they made about as much as one skilled worker. "If the actual work is not contemptible," she wrote, "the conditions are and remind me of the laceworkers of Calais, who did the finer work, not the machine work, producing lovely webs in hovels." It was at this low point in their lives that Mollie finally agreed to a divorce, and Christina and Bill were, at long last, married on February 23, 1952.

Rowley notes that "Stead's fiction, angrier, more relentless than ever, did not appeal to 1950's war-scarred sensibilities, which celebrated femininity, family and hearth. From now on, her fiction offered neither moral integrity nor hope. Instead, it confronted readers with poverty, corruption and self-deception—things they preferred to forget." Her late books include *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (New York, 1948; London, 1981), *Cotter's England* (published in America under the title *Dark Places of the Heart*—New York, 1966; London, 1967), *The People With the Dogs* (New York, 1952; London, 1981), *The Puzzleheaded Girl* (New York, 1967; London, 1968), and *Miss Herbert* (New York, 1976; London, 1979). None of them was exactly snapped up by publishers; London publishers were even less confident in her marketability than New York ones, and she generally had to shop her manuscripts around for many years. *Miss Herbert*, for example, was not published until some twenty years after it was written. Written in the late Forties, *The Little Hotel* (London and Sydney, 1973; New York, 1975) is perhaps the best of these later novels.

Jarrell's 1955 article on Stead reawoke a certain public interest in this obscure writer. But she did not receive any real degree of popularity until 1965, when *The Man Who Loved Children* was reissued in the United States. This time the critics raved, calling it a "long-neglected masterpiece," and suddenly in her sixties Stead was famous. Publishers finally deemed that she might be moderately bankable, and the door was opened for the publication of her postwar novels.

She had little time to enjoy her triumph. Bill's health began to deteriorate in 1966, and two years later he died of stomach cancer. Over the years Stead had begun to take him for granted, treat him highhandedly, and flaunt her interest in other, more glamorous men. Now she was overcome by sorrow and guilt. She was lost without Bill, and wrote virtually nothing after his death.

Stead had always blamed Blake for their peripatetic life. It had undoubtedly taken its toll on her and her work: "We waste his money, lose homes, books, split friendships, have no circle: every thing I write is in [a] vacuum, he continues to work at worthless jobs." Besides, as an expatriate Stead was denied access to her natural material and handicapped in her efforts to write about people she came in contact with. "You can't write about foreigners," she said. "They write better about themselves." Yet with Blake gone she wandered more compulsively than ever. The fact was that as a result of their travels—and of Stead's character, too, no doubt—she had developed no real ties anywhere. In old age she returned to Australia not so much because she wanted to end her days in her native country as because she simply had nowhere else to go, and no one to go to.

She had herself become that object she so despised—a lonely, unloved woman. Unattractive, even ugly, in youth, she had cultivated the persona—in which, perhaps, only she believed—of a man's woman. "I adore men," she said. "While there is a man left on earth, I'll never be a feminist." She always flirted boldly with the attractive men around her. As long as Bill was in the background she had felt secure, but with him gone it became all too evident that she was not sought after by the male sex. The lack of

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romance in her life prompted her move to Australia, but once there she unsurprisingly found it difficult to make a place for herself within the family she had so decidedly rejected a half-century earlier. Nor had she any really good friends in the country.

Thanks to the efforts of writers like Patrick White, the leading Australian novelist, Stead was welcomed to the Australian literary community rather than resented as "un-Australian," as had been the case in the past. But she was old, imperious, and difficult: "She had strong views, strong prejudices, some of which she maintained in the teeth of all evidence," said one acquaintance, and her friends secretly totted up the number of times in an evening she would begin a statement with "My dear, you're wrong." White thought her the greatest writer Australia had produced, but her arrogance infuriated him; her family tolerated her, but she hardly went out of her way to be pleasant. She died in 1983, striking out at her long-suffering family even in death by asking that her sisters not attend her funeral. She had few mourners, and no one returned to the crematorium the next day to claim her ashes.

Hazel Rowley has tackled a remarkably difficult task in writing Christina Stead's life. For Stead, prickly, enraged, self-deluding, was a woman easy to admire, difficult to warm to—similar in this respect to Virginia Woolf, a writer she had much in common with but deeply disliked. Rowley miraculously succeeds in bringing out Stead's attractive characteristics: her longing for love, her merciless and terrible humor, her utter refusal to write in any style but her own.

Rowley is also tireless in her determination to grasp the fundamentals of Stead's aesthetic. She makes it clear that of the two men in Christina Stead's life, it was to the naturalist David Stead rather than the Marxist Bill Blech that Stead most fully owed her fictional method. "When you're a little girl and you look in an aquarium and you see fish doing this and that . . . you don't criticize and say they should do something else. And that's the way I was brought up," she claimed.

This is really not true: Stead was a judgmental writer. Indeed if there is any dominant motivation for her writing it is rage. But she understood and accepted the unpalatable truths of human relations. "I can't get over how cruel human beings, not are, but *must be*, to each other—for ever and ever, I suppose. It is a real inferno we are born into."

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To see is to believe: the life & films of Jean Renoir

by John Simon

Plenty has been written about Jean Renoir, by himself and others. Nevertheless a new book on the filmmaker is always received with interest. After all, Renoir was not only a true artist himself but also the son of one; he made some universally beloved movies; he had cinematic careers in both the old world and the new, in Paris and in Hollywood; he became in his later years a popular Los Angelino whose house was a gathering place for Gallic Hollywood, as well as a site of pilgrimage for young cineasts from all over; he had a long life, and was eager and able to talk about it; he remained youthful in spirit to the end, even in spite of declining health. He was a genius and a nice man—a rare enough combination.

Renoir's fame rests on relatively few films, of which only two seem to enjoy undisputed favor: *La grande Illusion* and *La Règle du jeu*. Connoisseurs may have their own favorites as well; mine are *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* and *Une Partie de campagne*. Most of the rest, fine as some of them are, strike me as debatable, especially the American films, preferred by the cultists from the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Everybody, however, is at one in liking the man; the rotund, jolly Frenchman who genuinely fancied actors, relished food, and cared about people. That he was homely (remember him as Octave in *La Règle du jeu*?) redounds to his credit, as does the limp that was the legacy of a World War I wound. Human, all too human, is the aroma emanating from his persona and his *oeuvre*.

It helps, too, that the young filmmakers of the New Wave adopted Renoir as their precursor and patron saint. A connection can indeed be traced, particularly in his love of location shooting or, failing that, being able to work inexpensively in small, intimate spaces (although he could also, as in *The River*, rake up a hefty budget). He was not at all arty, and was one of the first major directors to embrace color, which many purists at the time considered vulgar. He often wrote his own screenplays, and always at least collaborated on them. He was one of the few directors to have something like a permanent acting company, at least in his French films; in Hollywood, such a thing was and is inconceivable. Only three women were important in his life: he was married to the first and, eventually, the third; as good as married to the second. Which does not mean that he lacked an eye for the ladies, but the eye was a platonic one.

He hated school, and did not have much of a formal education; few filmmakers do. Yet he was also quite a decent writer, as his books about his father and about himself, and his various plays and fictions, demonstrate. He was a man of endearingly zesty contradictions: though a tremendous gourmet, he couldn't cook anything except a leg of lamb; though a lover of language, he could not learn proper English in all his many American years; though a peaceable fellow, he was energetically active in World War I in the French cavalry and, later, air

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force; though the son of a master painter, he owned very little art other than his father's work, and sometimes refused the offer to buy even that. And unlike many famous men's sons, he never rebelled against his old man.

All this and much more emerges from Ronald Bergan's new biography, *Jean Renoir: Projections of Paradise*, a useful, readable book that manages in under four hundred pages—short by today's standards—to tell a good deal about Renoir's life and work.[1] If it has any special strengths, they are a general levelheadedness and a profusion of satisfying gossip. For example, I have often wondered why Jean would have chosen Valentine Tessier, gifted actress though she was, to play Emma in his film of *Madame Bovary*, given that she was forty and looked it. I learn from Bergan, as I did not from other books, that she was the mistress of Gaston Gallimard, publisher of the mighty *Nouvelle Revue Française* and owner of the Nouvelle Société des Films, which was financing this venture. With so much *nouvelle* to back her up, Mlle Tessier could afford to be a bit *vieille* for the part.

Probably the most detailed analysis of Renoir's films can be found in Alexander Sesonske's *Jean Renoir: The French Films, 1924–1939*. But Sesonske was Renoir's fan and friend, and wrote under the master's watchful eye. Thus he tells us nothing about Tessier's private life, and certainly not, as we read in Bergan, that the actress fell during the filming ever more deeply in love with the actor who played her husband: Pierre Renoir, the director's older brother. Bergan writes: "Gallimard found out and wrote her desperate letters from Paris, which Tessier returned unopened. There was also a rumour that the jealous Gallimard stole into the lab at Billancourt Studio one night, found the wedding night scene in which Valentine and Pierre kiss, and burned it out of the film."

Although such details may not help one's critical understanding of Renoir's work, they re-create the atmosphere in which the film was shot, and make for lively reading. And this attitude of irreverence liberates Bergan's critical judgment. Sesonske, for instance, defends the casting of Tessier and the equally overage Pierre Renoir. He observes that "neither character ages physically during the film; this creates a notable deviation from the novel, for Flaubert describes the changes in Charles that annoy Emma." So far, so good; however, we read that "this is a fault only in the relation of the film to the novel. Within the film, nothing indicates that the age of the persons should be other than it is. If we can overlook this departure from Flaubert, there is a solidity in each performance which more than compensates." Rubbish.

Sesonske's special pleading continues for a couple of pages. Bergan is much shorter and nearer the mark with his "fatal miscasting of the title role. . . . Tessier, obviously a stage actress of considerable presence and range, is too much the 'grande dame' in the part, too emotional, and certainly too old. . . . She is never Flaubert's romantic young girl, fresh from the convent, who escapes the monotony of her provincial environment by carrying on illicit affairs which she invests with false glamour. She suggests, rather, a woman who has once lived an exciting life before marrying Charles." In its sensible, unassuming way this is practical criticism, free from such absurdities as Sesonske's "If we can overlook this departure from Flaubert . . ." The advanced and immutable ages of the characters would not make sense under any circumstances, even if the film were not based on a famous novel. But how can one overlook such departures from a masterpiece that everybody knows and loves?

Well, maybe not everybody. Bergan amusingly adduces Auguste Renoir's view of the novel as "the story of an idiot whose wife wanted to become somebody. When one has read these 300 pages one can't help thinking, 'I can't be bothered with these creatures.'" There speaks a great painter and an illiterate.

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1 *Jean Renoir: Projections of Paradise*, by Ronald Bergan; The Overlook Press, 378 pages, $23.95

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Yet Bergan's usefulness does not stop there. He tells us that originally the screenplay was to be written by Gallimard's friend, the celebrated novelist Roger Martin du Gard (*Les Thibault*), and that Jacques Feyder (*Carnival in Flanders*) was to direct. "But after a disastrous lunch with Gallimard and Tessier, Feyder said he could not see Valentine in the role. As a matter of fact, although he was being honest, Feyder was hoping to get the plum part for his actress wife, Françoise Rosay. . . . However, the forty-two-year-old Rosay would have been even more miscast than the forty-year-old Tessier. When Feyder withdrew, so did Roger Martin du Gard."

This seems to me at least as useful as Sesonske's highfalutin and detailed—sometimes almost frame-by-frame—analyses, vitiated as they are by adulation. And Bergan makes the obvious but necessary comment, "Only those privileged few who saw it in its original three-hour version, before it lost seventy-three minutes on release, were able to judge the film as it was conceived." It is terrible that when the distributors successfully fought off the producers' insistence on releasing the uncut film, they were also able to destroy the cut parts of the negative. This sort of ruthlessness was common in those days, and is by no means unusual now. Still, it is amazing with what equanimity Renoir, as Bergan puts it, "cut a bleeding chunk" from the film.

Perhaps the most egregious case of cut and destroy in the history of cinema was what RKO did to Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons*, for which the chief blame rests with George Schaefer and the sidekick who replaced him as head of the company, Charles W. Koerner. That was the man who (as we learn from *This Is Orson Welles*) was instrumental "in causing the studio's disastrous break with Welles." Hence it is fascinating to read here that this same Charles W. Koerner gave complete freedom to Renoir and his scriptwriter, Dudley Nichols, in the making of one of Renoir's worst films, the ghastly agitprop *This Land Is Mine*, and even more so that "Koerner was someone Jean greatly admired." Renoir is quoted: "[Koerner] was an understanding man, a man who knew the film market . . . but who allowed for experimentation just the same."

This about the butcher of *Ambersons* from the victim of *Bovary* and other similar acts of vandalism? What are we to conclude? That Renoir lacked the *Menschenkenntnis* needed to judge people's worth, or worthlessness? (In a letter, he described the notorious Lee and Paula Strasberg as admirable!) Or that, unlike the intractable Welles, who fought for his rights like a tiger—or, more aptly, a rogue elephant—Renoir was amenable, soft? A little bit of both, I suspect. He was certainly putty in the hands of his first wife, the predatorily ambitious Dédée (i.e., Andrée Madeleine Heuschling), who became his first, and in many ways worst, leading lady.

Bergan convincingly evokes Jean's childhood as the son of an artist for whom painting from nature was a priority, and a mother, Aline, who came from Essoyes in Burgundy, the region associated with the best French cuisine. On both sides, Jean was descended from what used to be called the lower orders, and his sympathies in the films to come were on the side of the people, even as his politics, such as they were, were always to the left. All life long, too, he retained his Burgundian accent with the rolled r's, much like one of his subsequent admirers, Bertolt Brecht, who similarly preserved his rolled Augsburg r's. Perhaps the primary influence on Jean was his beloved Gabrielle, the wonderful maid whom the Renoirs cherished: Auguste raptly painted her, Aline depended on her, and the boys, Jean and his younger brother, Claude (Coco), hung from her. It was this warm-hearted girl—"Bibou" to Jean's childish tongue—who took the future filmmaker to see Guignol and the other puppets in the Tuileries Gardens, puppets that were the adoring child's introduction to the performing arts. "Guignol," Renoir was to say, "endowed me with a fondness for simple tales and a profound mistrust for what is generally called psychology."

Another important early influence was little Godefer, the son of poor farm laborers,

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who became one of Jean's chums at Essoyes, where Auguste had bought a house. It was Godefer who introduced Jean to the pleasures of freshwater pike-poaching, and poachers duly became an important element in the work of the future cineast. With another friend, Paul Cézanne, the son of the painter, Jean went boating in a flat-bottomed boat propelled by poles, and fell in love with rivers, which were to become likewise a major presence in his films. Auguste had told little Jean, "You have to be a cork, a cork in the current. You have to follow the current," a piece of advice that stuck with him, re-enforced as it was by those voluptuous river driftings.

Bergan is good at evoking details of Jean's early life that could have proved formative, but less so at following through on these speculations. Thus we hear about Auguste's not allowing the child's long locks to be shorn—they supposedly provided protection against the sun and knocks on the head—so that for years Jean, much to his disgust, was mistaken for a little girl. How, one wonders, did this affect his attitude toward women? For a film director, and a French one at that, Renoir was remarkably abstemious where women were concerned. One gets the feeling that, save for his three consorts, no one shared the director's bed, or couch. A virtue may be its own justification, but I am tempted to think that this fidelity had something to do with his mother's memory. When Jean lay wounded in World War I and his leg was about to be amputated, it was Aline who, despite severe suffering from diabetes, journeyed to his bedside and found a specialist who was able to salvage the limb the army doctors were about to hack off, something that might also have resulted in Jean's death. But she so strained her poor health that Jean believed it was this, and not diabetes, that killed Aline, which filled him with "a feeling of profound guilt . . . an emotion that lingered for the rest of his life." And a good son is not unfaithful to his self-sacrificing mother.

With all three of his main women Jean assumed a somewhat subservient, perhaps filial, role. "Just as he had been influenced to go into film-making by Dédée, and to take a more active part in politics by Marguerite [Houllé], he was inclining more toward the spiritual as he grew closer to Dido [Freire]," Bergan writes. In their various ways, all three women proved extremely useful to Jean. And each of them came at exactly the right moment.

Jean's parents had feared that their middle son would not turn into anything more than a blacksmith or carpenter, and the boy himself thought of becoming a gendarme. Indeed, starting out in life, he, Dédée, and brother Coco (a ne'er-do-well) ran a ceramics workshop. Dédée, however, wanted to be a movie star, and goaded her husband (whom she did not love) into filmmaking. She had originally landed at the Renoir home—Les Colettes, at Cagnes on the Riviera—because Matisse, whose model she wanted to become, sent her there: "You're a Renoir," he told her. And she became one with a vengeance, posing for Auguste, and, out of sheer ambition, marrying Jean. She was not, to my mind, a great beauty, and Bergan quotes a girlfriend of hers about her "almost white eyes like a pig's," her plumpish figure, short legs, and big behind. Yet Charles Boyer, who almost acted with her in Jean's *The Little Match Girl*, thought her "the most beautiful woman he had ever seen." Be that as it may, it was she who got Renoir to direct; she and the films of Charlie Chaplin, which Jean kept enthusiastically seeing and reseeing. Yet at first he wanted only to satisfy his wife's ambition, and quickly return to his ceramics.

The five movies that Renoir made with Catherine Hessling, as Dédée chose to call herself because it sounded American to her, are all undistinguished. But they do show moments of inspiration and technical inventiveness worthy of an admirer of D. W. Griffith, whom Jean worshiped next to Chaplin. Even so, it was not until his eleventh effort, *La Chienne* (1931), that the hand of a master became unmistakable. But from the very beginning, Renoir films were, a bit like the

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ceramics workshop, a cottage industry, the product of a co-operative—as were to some extent the famous later ones. They were the work of a group of friends, with the house and property of one of them often providing the needed locations. Almost everyone would chip in with a performance, including Jean's young son, Alain, to whom Dédée was a wretched mother—often pretending the kid was her nephew—but Jean a doting father.

The coming of sound and more exacting film procedures marked also the arrival of Marguerite Houllé as Jean's editor and mistress. A woman of indisputable talent, she was to serve Jean in good stead, and though he did not marry her, mainly because Dédée wouldn't give him a divorce, he allowed her to use the name Marguerite Renoir henceforward. A committed leftist, she propelled Jean in that direction—though not to extremes—and the results were to be films such as *Toni* (1935), an earthy tale of working-class people; *La Marseillaise* (1938), Jean's best historical film; *La Bête humaine* (1938); and the four masterpieces: *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1935), co-scripted with the incomparable Jacques Prévert; *Une Partie de campagne* (1936, but not released until 1946), which reincarnates the work of Auguste in cinematic terms; *La grande Illusion* (1937), probably the finest prisoner-of-war film ever made; and *La Règle du jeu* (1939), the film that seems to figure on more top ten lists than any other and, I think, rightly so.

But Dido Freire, the Brazilian who became his second wife and sharer of his American years, was the one who, as Bergan puts it, inclined him toward the spiritual. Jean had been a reasonably good Catholic all along, Auguste having sent him to a Catholic school. "In Protestant schools," the painter had declared, "you become a pederast, but with Catholics it's more likely to be masturbation. I prefer the latter." In California, with Dido, Jean was a regular Sunday churchgoer, but the film in which spiritual values figure most tellingly is *The River*, where the religion is Brahmanism. Of no small importance either was that Dido, though she didn't cook, kept a comfortable house for Jean, and was a good mother to Alain, so shabbily treated by his real one. And when Jean was too old to make movies, Dido kept him alive by encouraging him to write instead. Even as he was dying in 1979, at age eighty-four, Renoir was still planning a new novel.

The amazing thing is that Renoir ended up liking Los Angeles. As it did to all young Europeans, filmmakers or not, Hollywood seemed a kind of earthly paradise to him. But only from a distance: a slip of Renoir's tongue about his delight to be working for Fifteenth Century Fox says it all. His boss, Darryl Zanuck, took a liking to him, which guaranteed he was not going to starve. But neither man really understood the other, and the chronicle of the cross purposes at which they labored comprises some of the most interesting and distressing pages of Bergan's book. It was a misunderstanding in equal measure ludicrous and pathetic. Consider only Renoir's being made to direct a Deanna Durbin movie, though he lasted but a short time on it; or his bringing Antoine de Saint-Exupéry out to Hollywood to work with him on an adaptation of *Terre des hommes*, for what Jean hoped would be his most beautiful film, only to have his project fall on deaf ears.

Oddly enough, though, this did not prevent Jean from liking life in California. He imported some of the olive trees from Cagnes; his beloved Gabrielle and her New England painter husband, Conrad Slade, moved into the house next door; the Hollywood French colony, which included some of his actors from the old days, such as Marcel Dalio, made the house their social and cultural center. He traveled back to Europe to shoot some movies there—movies that may have suffered from his topographical and psychological dividedness—but he never gave up his new home. What would have happened had he moved wholly back to France—something he couldn't have done for many years with Dido until Dédée was

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finally bought and coerced into divorcing him—we shall never know. *French Cancan* (1955) is, for me, the only interesting movie of his final period. *Le Carrosse d'or* (1953), made on the cheap with the by now overage and homely Anna Magnani and a bargain-basement supporting cast, leaves me cold; *Eléna et les hommes* (1956) may have been good in its pristine European version, but the badly cut *Paris Does Strange Things* (as it was released here) does nothing for me, strange or otherwise. And the last four films strike me as senile and pitiful.

Renoir's last achievement was his talk. All through the closing years of his life he was being interviewed by everyone under the California sun and Paris moon, and he thrived on these interviews. As Bergan remarks, "For him, the making of a film was a good excuse to be in the company of people he liked and loved"; it is nice to know that in Jean's last years the interviewers (sometimes several in tandem, viz. Truffaut and Louis Malle) re-created for him the convivial atmosphere of a film shoot.

What is obvious from the viewing of any film by Renoir is that he loved his actors, who repaid this love with great performances. Not for him was John Ford's advice —given in French, no less—"Mon cher Jean, don't ever forget what I'm going to tell you. Actors are crap." Bergan quotes Renoir: "In the end technique consists in taking the actors as seriously as one takes cars when filming a car accident. You always film with three cameras because you're not going to destroy several cars, but actors are treated with less consideration." Great as his stage and screen career was, Louis Jouvet was never better than as the Baron in Renoir's *The Lower Depths*. Jean Gabin, Michel Simon, Julien Carette, always wonderful, reached special heights in Renoir films. Was there greater symbiotic acting than that of Pierre Fresnay and Erich von Stroheim in *La grande Illusion*? When were Mila Parély and Paulette Dubost as fine as they were in *La Règle du jeu* as, respectively, the Marquis's temperamental mistress and the Marquise's devoted maid? Could Pierre Renoir and Lise Delamare have been bettered as the doomed royal couple in *La Marseillaise*? Or Nora Swinburne and Esmond Knight as the sympathetic parents in *The River*? And surely the remarkable Jules Berry created one of the most charming, unforgettable cinematic villains for Renoir as Batala in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*.

The list could go on and on; generally, the whole ensemble in a Renoir film acts in harmonious, joint excellence. And what marvelous music in all those movies, by the likes of Darius Milhaud, Jean Wiener, Kurt Weill, Hanns Eisler, George van Parys—only Arthur Honegger was, strangely, overlooked. And, again and again, there was the matchless Joseph Kosma, whose complete film scores, should they ever become available on CD, would be a revelation to all of us.

There is also, of course, superb cinematography in these films, often by Jean's gifted nephew, Claude Renoir (Pierre's son), which reaches an early climax in the very first solo job he did for his uncle in *Une Partie de campagne*. In forty-five minutes the two Renoirs create a sense of a whole mode of life, of what the outdoors can do to a bunch of city folk in one Panic outburst. As Bergan puts it, "Claude Renoir's travelling camera moves along the river dwelling on the water and the banks—the rain sweeping the river is magnificently used—balanced by Kosma's music, including a lovely, lilting tune hummed by Germaine Montero, creating wistful but unsentimental nostalgia for the days of the director's childhood. Renoir's glowing, witty, bitter-sweet, sensuous tribute to the countryside through which a river runs has seldom been surpassed." Seldom? Never.

When the much older Renoir returned to a similar subject in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1959), for all that the film was in color (but not photographed by Claude), this celebration of his father's world—shot mostly at Les Collettes, where the scapegrace Coco still lived, and Auguste's olive trees were as graceful as ever—did not come off nearly so well. Only the actress playing the heroine,

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Catherine Rouvel, still embodied the old—or young—Jean Renoir charm. As Raymond Durgnat describes her in his *Jean Renoir*, "Her animality rivals Bardot's, but generously rather than aggressively, sunnily rather than defiantly." That, for me, conveys also the way Renoir set out in pursuit of the truth: generously rather than aggressively, sunnily rather than defiantly. He seems, in his best movies, to be improvising even when he isn't; there is no excogitated Renoir style: *celare artem* is his great specialty.

Everyone who has written about Renoir has wrestled with assessing and expressing the filmmaker's particular quality. In his pioneer study, André Bazin wrote: "The climate of fraternity which reigned within his company eventually established itself between the film and the spectators, for it was always Renoir's desire to elicit from the public not admiration but a sense of complicity, a friendly connivance quite foreign to the mechanical impersonality of the medium." This is very true, but it applies equally to many other great directors. In *Jean Renoir: The World of His Films*, Leo Braudy speculates, "The greatness of his films more often lies in their inconclusiveness, their openness, and their rich tentativeness than in any absolute formulation of the truths of nature or the truths of the theater, the claims of the individual or the claims of society." There is something to this, but again, all true art shies away from absolute formulation.

Bergan attempts no such definition. But he quotes enough from Renoir, tells enough anecdotes, adduces enough factual material to enable the reader, provided he has seen some of these films, to undertake his own conclusions. I am especially grateful for this quotation: "If I were a dictator, I would forbid all pieces of chalk on stage and on sets. What's really important is to bring to life a certain character, and the rest is a joke. . . ." Yet the irony is that, as Bergan tells us, Renoir did use chalk marks on the floor: it saved time and cut expenses. But this was also the Renoir who told a producer, "When you are actually filming, you must not think of the cost. You can always get money, you cannot always get truth." I guess it depended on whether Renoir himself was the producer, or whether someone else was left holding the money bag.

Repeatedly, a certain childishness and an undeniable shrewdness jostle each other in Renoir. As Bergan notes, Marguerite (Houllé) Renoir, his mistress and the editor of his best films, is hardly ever mentioned by him in his memoirs and interviews. Is this a man fearing Dido's jealousy or a child taking his mother for granted? For years Jean thought the American silver dollar was named after the gallery owner Ambroise Vollard, his father's art dealer and biographer; late in life, he would still refer to the coin as "a vollard." His jokes were often childish, as when he called Hollywood "Tonsiltown." This too was the chap who, as Leslie Caron reports, would take any pill in sight, even pills for menstruation if he happened to see a woman taking them. Above all, this was the man whose autobiography ends with the words to his childhood nurse, "Wait for me, Gabrielle." He was then eighty, and Gabrielle had been dead for fifteen years.

Yet this was also the man philosophical enough to be able to see both sides of an issue, and whose most celebrated line of dialogue (from *La Règle du jeu*) runs, "The terrible thing about this world is that everybody has his reason." He was, likewise, canny enough to realize that "vamps have to be played by women with innocent faces. Women with innocent faces are the most dangerous ones." And he was mature enough to perceive that, in the end, he was neither French nor American: "The environment which has made me what I am is the cinema. I am a citizen of the world of film."

Perhaps the farthest Bergan goes in trying to capture the essence of the filmmaker is the remark, "Mozartian is an adjective that often comes to mind when describing a number of Renoir films." But this aperçu is barely expanded on, and the epithet "Mozartian," like

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"Shakespearean," has lost what little value it may have had through facile overuse. Altogether, analytical acumen is not Bergan's strong suit. In trying, for instance, to establish the indebtedness of *La Règle du jeu* to Marivaux (beyond that to Musset's *Les Caprices de Marianne*, which is manifest), he tells us that "its title echoes Marivaux's best-known play, *Le Jeu de l'amour*." Now, the full title of that play is *Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard*, and that, in its implied anomie, is as far as you can get from *La Règle du jeu*. Next, he tells us that Nora Gregor in the movie "presents a touching, fragile, rather vain Marschallin." Christine, whom Gregor portrays, does have an extramarital affair like the Marschallin in Hofmannsthal and Strauss's *Rosenkavalier*, but that is where the similarity ends. Certainly the opera's Marschallin is neither fragile nor vain, though she is touching, but then so is Little Red Riding Hood. Bergan, however, proceeding from the coincidence that Gregor was married to Prince Stahremberg, an Austrian nobleman, and that the Marschallin is also an Austrian noblewoman, rushes into a useless and misleading comparison.

Again, at the end of his chapter on *The River*, Bergan observes: "It was only after *The River* that Fritz Lang visited India in 1956 to make *Taj-Mahal*, though the project was abandoned, and Roberto Rossellini went there to direct *India* (1958). *The River* inspired James Ivory to make films in India, and Louis Malle's *Phantom India* (1969) followed." This display of erudition is impressive, but what has it to do with criticism? The Rossellini and Malle films were documentaries, and owe little or nothing to *The River*, which is a feature. *Taj-Mahal* was never made, so why bring it up? As for James Ivory, his Indian films are a far cry from Renoir's. Is this, then, the legacy of *The River* or just ostentatious free association, which Bergan mistakes for the higher criticism?

He also has trouble with languages. In French, he seems to have a fixation on the feminine. Thus Truffaut's *Domicile conjugal* become *conjugale*, the *Nouvel Observateur* becomes *Nouvelle* (like the cuisine), *Sur les Bords de la rivière* becomes *Sur Les Bordes*, etc. (capitalization in the book, incidentally, is totally insane, both in French and in English: sometimes everything including *le* and *la*, *the* and *and* gets capitalized, sometimes nothing does). We also read about *Montmartroise* humor and the *Montmartroise* Renoir, *Arlésienne* extras (both men and women), a *Provençale* tale, and so on. His next favorite is the unwarranted plural. So we get "*politiques des auteurs*," "a *Boches film*" (for a German movie), and "the cuisine *chez les Renoirs*," where the idiom is "*chez* Renoir." Other errors include "*Manifeste de [sic] Surréalisme*" and, most embarrassingly, Jean Vigo's famed documentary, *A propos de Nice*, as *L'Apropos de Nice*, which is bad film history and worse French.

Nor is Bergan luckier with German: the Brecht-Dudow film called *Kuhle Wampe* becomes "*Kühle Wampe*," wrong, although the *umlaut* might seem indicated. But his biggest problem is with English. We read "the amount of times," "more perfect," "exhorbitant," "superceded," "between three men," "neither *The River* nor *Le Carrosse d'or* were successful," "emotionally suppressed," "indispensible," etc., not to mention a number of instances of poor syntax.

There are factual errors as well. Jean's friend André Zwoboda is always "Zwobada," the distinguished cinematographer Pierre Lhomme becomes "L'Homme," and *Images d'Epinal* [*sic*] is not one particular "book with colored pictures" but a type of garish illustration in a whole series of cheap books. Some people, to be sure, may not be bothered by errors of this nature; indeed, grammar, syntax, orthography, and attention to detail may all be things of the past. Too bad, I say.

This said, *Jean Renoir: Projections of Paradise* may still be an informative book for the general reader, especially since Bergan often quotes judiciously. I am particularly in his debt for two quotations. One is in an account of how the Jean Renoirs and the Paul Cézannes fled south from the Germans in

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1940. One night they spent in a barn in the Limousin, which Paul hung with some of his father's precious works. This, wrote Jean, was a setting Paul's father would have relished: "At night in that barn we fell asleep amid the great peace that emanates from masterpieces." Only someone who himself was a master could have come up with that inspired insight and its perfect phrasing.

Then there is Renoir's statement of his aims in *Le Carrosse d'or*: "I tried, if you like, to erase the borders between the representation of reality and reality itself. I tried to establish a kind of confusion between acting on a theatrical stage and acting in life." If for "theatrical stage" we substitute "cinematic screen," we have a pretty fair description of what Jean Renoir's *oeuvre* is about. A Renoir film finally triumphs because of its lifelikeness: you enjoy or admire all kinds of movies; Renoir's you *believe*.

But why, you ask, this belief; how is this trust engendered? I can illustrate it best with an anecdote about Jean's son, Alain, whom I knew when we were fellow graduate students in comparative literature at Harvard. Alain (who helped Bergan with this book, and is frequently mentioned in it) was to become a distinguished professor of Old English at Berkeley. But back then, a charming and witty young man, he used to have us all in stitches just by reciting a passage in Anglo-Saxon or Middle English with his wonderfully French accent, something he could no more lose than his father could. If you haven't heard *Beowulf* or Chaucer with a French accent, you have missed out on one of life's smaller but more exquisite wonders. And that is what so enriches the *oeuvre* of Jean Renoir: the delicious little incongruities of existence captured in all their redolent aliveness.

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Poems *by Enid Shomer, Frederick Morgan & Richard Lourie*

Cadillac

Imagine my squat, blue-eyed Russian
grandfather, a stogie in his fist, a Stetson

on his head, a silk suit precisely vented,
ordered from a rabbi with a sideline and friends

in Hong Kong. Imagine his voyage here alone
at thirteen, the sea like a pasture of fescue combed

by the wind and him below decks in that carousel
of piss and vomit. Imagine the babies crying, the charred smell

of food cooked in steerage, the dark knots
of men smoking and gambling. Did they hate

Jews, too? Imagine him on Ellis Island with his wild Slavic face
and the space between his shoulders that always

itched, puffing out his chest for the doctors.
One deep breath put his name on the roster

Americanized—the *ik* chopped off of Magazinik
to make Magazine, a word he understands means a quick

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book. He has no notion yet of luxury or charity, of leather
sofas or engraved plaques or dinners in honor

of. These will come after ice cream vending
and carpentry thin his voice and thicken his hands,

after he loses every cent in the Depression, and begins
his big ventures—Fort Stevens, Brandywine,

1000 Connecticut Avenue, that soaring granite address
that was like the White House for us,

a sparkling tower where he sat like a prince
thirty levels above the polished marble dance

floor of the lobby. O once more let him watch the phony
wrestlers on TV, his shoulders lurching with each throw.

I want to see him sop pleasure again from a bowl
with a heel of bread, dipping and slurping, his whole

face slick with broth and steam. And the deck
of nudie cards he kept hidden in the top right desk

drawer, redheads with tits like roses. And the slow
way he rolled up his "l"s on his tongue, as if savoring fish roe.

I remember how short he was behind the wheel of his prize—
they called them Jew canoes in those days—

how joyfully he packed us in on Sundays, plowing down the road,
letting the big car drift across the center line, like a parade.

—*Enid Shomer*

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May night

By midnight all the street noises were stilled
except for now and then a slamming door,
a gust of muffled laughter, or—in the distance—
the old Sixth Avenue El's receding roar.

You stood at the window. I had left off playing
Schumann's *Des Abends* on the scratched upright
and turned to you now, thinking at last you'd utter
such words as had eluded us all night.

Your gaze gave back my own. Your pensive eyes,
aglint with tears, darkened as though to warn me
that even now our great game might be lost,

and so I rose, not speaking, and stood by you—
and saw then, on your desk in the dim corner,
that opened letter, vengeful as a ghost.

—*Frederick Morgan*

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September 1957

White sky in the last light.
Imminence of trees.
Pale birch-clumps amid gray trunks of pine.

Black branchings on the white
remoteness. Tracework.
Visible clusterings, division of leaves.

Pale page of emptiness
on which some hand had scribbled
a message in impenetrable code—

for years he pondered it:
how to retrieve it,
how to redeem that last hope and despair.

—*Frederick Morgan*

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The self-pitier

Shrugging off success like any hero,
he dreams of scars and sympathy,
the cheek gash that smiles bashfully
at mouths cooing tiny zeroes of compassion.

Improving failure with calibrated valor,
his blameless leap and heart-break near-miss
bring stadiums to lamentation, his applause.

But he only sips the elixir of minor sorrow,
fearing the slam of true calamity
and the scorch of grief,
this careful half a Christ
who loves the swooning comfort of the Pietà
but dreads the resurrection and the life.

—Richard Lourie

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Art

"Truth & Fantasy": the small-scale inventions of Goya

by Karen Wilkin

Small pictures are special. Intimate, often reticent, they demand that we pay strict attention to what happens within their circumscribed boundaries, but in recompense, they allow us to approach them closely and, when they are illusionistic, to enter a magical miniaturized universe at once like and unlike our everyday, actual-size world. The works in the current exhibition "Goya: Truth and Fantasy, The Small Paintings" offer such pleasures in abundance, but even more important, they permit us to see the Spanish master at his most private.[1] Drawn from Goya's entire career, they range from early conceptions of commissioned pictures better known in their large, public, finished versions to eccentric little paintings done to please no one but the artist himself, from ingratiating miniature portraits of family members to tiny but ferocious works on ivory, like portable versions of the celebrated black frescos.

Such a "privileged" view of Goya is especially engaging, since he is notoriously elusive and hard to categorize. There's even some question about which century to assign him to; the Metropolitan, for example, after years of presenting Goya in its nineteenth-century galleries, as a precursor of Courbet and Manet, recently decided that he is an eighteenth-century painter and relocated its holdings. It's not, however, pure caprice. Goya's working lifespan stretched from the most frivolous moments of the Rococo to full-blown Romanticism. Remarkably long-lived despite bouts of a debilitating illness that destroyed his hearing, he was born in 1746 and died in 1828. Only six years younger than Fragonard, the chronicler of the *ancien régime*, Goya, like his French colleague, served the aristocracy and the nobility, painting their portraits and creating for them idealized images of peasant life and *fêtes gallantes*. Yet Goya outlived Fragonard by twenty-two years and his best-known (and often best) mature works are fierce indictments of cruelty and injustice, painted with a vigor and immediacy that not only defines much of the most advanced art of the nineteenth century, but speaks directly to present-day sensibilities.

Goya's nearly exact coeval was, however, neither a Rococo decorator nor a Romantic, but that paragon of Neo-Classicism, David (1748–1825), the "official" painter of both the austere republican values of the French revolution and the imperial splendors of Napoleon's court. No two artists' work could be further apart—not to mention the political

1 "Goya: Truth and Fantasy, The Small Paintings" opened at the Art Institute of Chicago on July 16 and is on view through October 16. It was previously seen at the Museo del Prado, Madrid (November 18, 1993–February 27, 1994) and the Royal Academy of Arts, London (March 17–June 12, 1994). A catalogue, edited by Juliet Wilson-Bareau, has been published by the three participating museums and the Yale University Press (384 pages, $55; $24.95 paper).

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differences between Napoleon's favorite portrait painter and the author of such outcries against Napoleon's Spanish campaign as *The Disasters of War* and *The Third of May*. David, a master of pristine geometric construction, incisive drawing, and archeological exactitude, seems to aspire to the values of the seventeenth century, to the cool sobriety, the rational order, and the sonorous harmonies of Poussin; the mature Goya prefigures the bursting energy of Géricault and Delacroix, artists young enough to be his grandchildren. But if Goya's lush paint-handling, his sensuous color, and his subversive intensity seem to anticipate the innovations of paradigmatic Romantics almost two generations his junior, his imagery can be bizarre enough to be claimed as ancestry for the improvisations of Ernst and the young Dalí. He can be, as well, very nearly as empathetic as Velázquez or Rembrandt, as unflinching and bold as Courbet or Manet, as merciless as Daumier or Grosz. And he can articulate form and dispose masses in ways that point both back to the crackling planes of El Greco and ahead to the Cubist disjunctions of Picasso. Goya has been labeled, not without justification, a proto-Romantic, a proto-Surrealist, an expressionist, a realist, a satirist, a populist, and more. As I said, he's hard to classify.

"Goya: Truth and Fantasy" traces the evolution of this protean figure from his early sojourn in Italy, in 1770 and 1771, to his last years of self-imposed exile in France, after 1824. The earliest work exhibited, a *Sketch for "Hannibal the Conqueror, Viewing Italy for the First Time from the Alps"* (1771, Private Collection, Madrid), was Goya's entry in a competition initiated by the Academy of Fine Arts in Parma. An atypical little picture, designed to fulfill the competition guidelines, it is nonetheless revealing; the agile, muscular figure of Hannibal bears witness to the young painter's careful scrutiny of such "required" models as the Apollo Belvedere and perhaps even of Michelangelo. An extraordinary notebook dating from the Italian years, now in the collection of the Prado, offers further information specifically about the history of the competition piece and generally about what Goya saw on his travels. (The notebook is well documented in the exhibition catalogue.) Clearly, the youthful painter's Italian experience was crucial to his formation; there's evidence that he drew upon what he learned there long after his return to Spain, especially when he approached religious themes.

In the Chicago exhibition, this is borne out by the selection of *bocetos*, studies for Goya's first important church commissions, from the 1770s and early 1780s. Painted, like the Parma competition piece, to convey information about proposed large-scale works, these small, rather schematic religious images were submitted to patrons in order to obtain permission to proceed with the larger works, which were expected to be more highly finished and detailed. The loose, brushy *bocetos* are often more appealing to twentieth-century taste than the smooth, rather static altarpieces derived from them, but many of the earliest sketches seem tentative, in comparison to Goya's firmly constructed finished paintings of the same period. There are exceptions, of course, such as the radiant *Sketch for "The Death of St. Joseph"* (1787, Flint Institute of Arts, Michigan), a bouquet of mauve, salmon, and glowing golden yellow, its incipient prettiness offset by the wrenched pose of the dying saint.

In contrast to the early religious works, Goya's sketches for the tapestries he designed for the Royal Factory are uniformly sprightly, charming, and generally more lively than the full-scale cartoons so familiar to us from the Prado. The boldness of Goya's touch is accentuated by the smallness of the format, often to the benefit of the picture. The sun gleams in the summer scenes, skies are tinged with pink and lavender, and everyone—except for the shivering peasants in an atypically somber winter scene—seems to be having a perfectly wonderful time. Yet as is true of so many of Goya's paintings, both public and private, it is color that finally carries the tapestry sketches, redeem-

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ing and transforming even less-than-inspired decorative schemes. The *Sketch for "Girls with Water Jars"* (1791, Paloma MacCrohon Garay Collection, Madrid), for example, is a rather stiff grouping of two women with elongated jugs balanced on their heads and a third who leans over a fountain behind them. The figures seem a little too small for their space, as Goya's figures often do, even at larger scale; I kept thinking about Longhi's Venetian interiors of more or less the same date, where similarly rigid little figures enact surprising and absorbing dramas. But in the end, Goya's sketch of the girls with water jugs is irresistible because of its delicious color harmonies: near-edible peach, apricot, and blue-green against a mass of golden ochre, with the dull red of the jars and the black and cadmium red of the girls' jackets as counterpoint. In the same way, a sketch for the well-known tapestry cartoon of girls tossing a straw manikin on a blanket is distinguished not for its conception or its structure—although they seem fresh and positively inspired, compared to *Girls with Water Jars*—but for its play of chalky orange-reds, yellows, and cool darks against a background of creamy rose-pinks.

Sometimes the *bocetos* are disappointing. The surviving sketches for the spectacular murals in the chapel of San Antonio de la Florida, Madrid, give no hint of the authoritative clarity, the modeling with broad planes and masses of light and dark, the sheer *physicality* of the frescos. Curiously, a proposal for a tapestry cartoon, the pellucid *Sketch for "The Meadow of San Isidro"* (1788, Museo del Prado, Madrid), with its gray-green view of the city and its hordes of mobile figures, comes closer to the near-sculptural "carving" of form, the articulation of broad backs against spread skirts and outstretched limbs, the sense of logical structure reinforced by contrasts of color and light, so characteristic of Goya's larger works. (At the Art Institute of Chicago, the proximity of El Greco's masterpiece of 1577, *The Assumption of the Virgin*, makes it possible to verify the link between Goya's habitual "faceting" of

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form and El Greco's sharper, more papery precedent.)

Being forced to make *bocetos* seems to have taught Goya how to paint small, if we are to judge by the exhibition's selection of cabinet pictures. As solid and fully realized as the most ambitious altarpiece but perfectly adjusted to their intimate scale, they are what they are, not models or substitutes for anything larger. These "*caprichos*"—fantastic inventions—painted in 1793 and '94 after an attack of a recurring illness (possibly lead poisoning from contact with his paints), must be read closely to grasp the full import of their strange dramas, the full complexity of their intricate figure compositions. In an often-quoted letter to the director of the Academy of San Fernando, Goya described his intentions:

> In order to occupy my imagination which has been depressed through dwelling on my misfortunes, and to compensate at least in part for some of the considerable expenses I have incurred, I set myself to painting a series of cabinet pictures in which I have been able to depict themes that cannot usually be addressed in commissioned works where *capricho* and invention have little part to play.

The result was a series of tightly focused, spatially inventive works, with subjects ranging from bullfights to shipwrecks, from the commedia dell'arte to the madhouse, from highway robbery to witches' rites. Like the celebrated prints with similar motifs, these small fantasy pictures are arresting works, and are often among Goya's most Rembrandtesque. *Interior of a Prison* and *Yard with Lunatics* (both 1793–94, the Bowes Museum, Ireland, and the Meadows Museum, Dallas, respectively), for example, a chilling pair of muscular nude groups backlit against sheets of palpable, dust-filled light, are clearly homages to Rembrandt's interiors, although that's not the only reason to pay attention to these potent little pictures. The unforgettable panel of flying witches, apparently sucked into the air by their cone-shaped hats, is an image without precedent in what used to be called high art, but it is nevertheless a little masterpiece.

The *bocetos* of the 1790s (with the exception of the exhibition's sketches for San Antonio de la Florida) share the new authority and boldness of the uncommissioned cabinet pictures. Like them, they are solidly constructed with large masses of tone and color, their warms and lights seemingly wrenched to the surface from enveloping expanses of cools and darks. Without appearing to be mere celebrations of the bravura brushstroke, they have a new economy of means: a single, broad stroke can stand for most of a figure; a flick of the brush adds a highlight that establishes a form in space. In all of the small paintings of this period, even when subject matter is less than compelling (or slightly repellent), the sheer conviction of Goya's touch, the richness of his color, and above all, the drama of his light can redeem even pot-boilers. A series extolling a friar who resisted the efforts of a bandit to take him hostage, for example, never degenerates entirely into illustration; instead, ravishing harmonies of grays, creams, and ochres, bathed in shimmering light, overwhelm the rather pedestrian compositions lifted from popular prints. In the same way, even though the small paintings from Goya's last decades are markedly macabre—plague hospitals, bandits, cannibals, and scenes of guerrilla warfare, not to mention painfully gory bullfights, predominate in the exhibition—they are absorbing simply as *paintings*, their brutal subject matter notwithstanding.

Despite these multiple delights, the pictures that seemed to attract the most attention in Chicago during my visit there were the admittedly enchanting portrait miniatures of Goya's only surviving child, Javier, his wife, Gumersinda Goicoechea, and her sisters and parents, painted in 1805, on the occasion of the young couple's wedding. Each member of the family is vividly and affectionately characterized; there's no sense of formality, but each individual has been awarded serious attention—and so have the ladies' modish and various hats. A more as-

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tonishing set of miniatures, dating from 1824–25, the beginning of the years in exile, were among the most potent works in the show. At the end of his life, Goya more or less invented a technique of working on ivory, probably drawing on his vast experience as a printmaker. According to contemporary descriptions, he coated the ivory with lampblack, then "let fall on it a drop of water which removed part of the black ground as it spread out, tracing random light areas. Goya took advantage of these traces and always turned them into something original and unexpected." The resulting images—nudes, grotesque heads, seated figures—excavated from darkness and sometimes enhanced with washes of watercolor, are tiny, but monumental, recalling in both their emotional intensity and their formal inventions nothing but the "expressionist" black frescos, now in the Prado, which Goya painted for his house in Madrid, the "Quinta del Sordo."

The Art Institute of Chicago, which owns a number of key works in the exhibition, is the only American venue for "Goya: Truth and Fantasy." Is it worth a trip to Chicago to see it? (Let's leave the presence of the Greco *Assumption*, Seurat's *La Grande Jatte*, and Matisse's *Bathers by a River* in the collection—justification enough, in themselves—out of the equation.) It's hard to say. Many of the best of the small paintings are well known—that marvelous full-length self-portrait, with the hat with the candles, for example—and were seen most recently in the 1989 exhibition at the Metropolitan, "Goya and the Spirit of the Enlightenment," a show with a problematic thesis, but with a lot of good pictures in it. Drawings and prints, so important to any understanding of Goya's achievement, are, not unexpectedly, given the show's title, given short shrift. There are plenty of wonderful things to look at, but the fundamental question remains whether it is really enlightening to examine an artist's development by comparing if not apples and oranges, at least oranges and grapefruits—that is to say, sketches and finished works selected because they are the same size as the sketches, as much as for any other reason. The problem, of course, is that the very nature of the *bocetos* ensures that they have qualities inherently different from finished works of any scale. The catalogue, with essays by Werner Hofmann and the curators, Juliet Wilson-Bareau and Manuela B. Mena Marqués, attempts to address the issue by reproducing both the *bocetos* and finished works, but the *bocetos* are often shown nearly actual size and in color, while the finished works are reproduced as small black-and-white photographs. Still, these aids to recollection are useful and many of the entries for individual works lucidly discuss the differences between initial conception and final version.

I'm not complaining. I'm delighted that I saw the show. I'd recommend having the catalogue, with its informative essays and entries for each work, mercifully free of jargon and cant. The color reproductions could, as usual, be better; there's none of the radiance or intensity of the best works. As a result of this show, however, Goya is no less difficult to categorize, but how could we have expected him to be? After all, the same man who painted those bold, seductive *majas* (both clothed and unclothed) in the Prado also painted that terrifying, heart-wrenching scene of execution, like a news photo ripped out of time; the same man painted that charming child in the green velvet coat at the Metropolitan and those brutal blacksmiths at the Frick.

Exhibition notes

"The Thaw Collection:
Master Drawings and New Acquisitions"
at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.
September 21, 1994–January 22, 1995

This is the third exhibition of new drawings from the collection of Eugene and Clare Thaw to be shown at the Morgan Library. It is also likely to be the last, since Mr. Thaw's interests in collecting have shifted largely to

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American Indian art. I suspect that most people who peruse the one hundred drawings on view here will be saddened by this fact. Anyone who could have assembled such a marvelous collection of master drawings is undoubtedly also capable of doing splendid things in the field of American Indian art. But the Thaw collection of drawings is so good that anyone who has been privileged to see it may be forgiven for wishing that Mr. Thaw would go on doing what he has done so well before.

Organized by Cara Dufour Denison, curator of drawings and prints at the Morgan, this exhibition consists of the seventy sheets that Mr. Thaw acquired since the last Morgan exhibition of his drawings, in 1985 (the first was a decade before, in 1975), along with thirty additional sheets from his collection to balance the exhibition. Mr. Thaw has promised the entire collection—250 drawings, dating from the Renaissance to the mid-twentieth century—to the Morgan. So while this may be the last exhibition of newly acquired drawings from the Thaw collection to be seen there, it will presumably not be the last time that one can go to the Morgan to see these exquisite works.

Approximately a third of the exhibition is devoted to Old Master drawings, including sheets by Jan Brueghel, Rubens, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Claude Lorrain, and Altdorfer. Among the highpoints of this part of the exhibition, which is shown *enfilade* in the Morgan's cloister gallery, are Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Portrait of a Man in a Black Cap*, a highly finished oil sketch on paper, and Tiepolo's droll fantasy *The Last Illness of Punchinello*.

This is one of those exhibitions in which every second item calls out for comment and admiration. There is Fragonard's haunting *Portrait of a Neapolitan Girl*, some beautiful drawings in chalk on blue paper by Prud'hon, and one of the best, least melodramatic landscapes I have ever seen by Caspar David Friedrich. (There are also a few Friedrichs with the usual quota of "sublimity.") The exhibition has been sensitively installed and one encounters many instructive juxtapositions. Perhaps the most illuminating conjunction is the pairing of Turner's fervent late watercolor *The Pass at Faido, St. Gotthard*, a swirling dynamo of color and movement, with John Ruskin's strikingly uncharacteristic copy or imitation, *Rocks in Unrest*.

There are many other splendid things: a pointillist study by Pissarro that achieves a remarkable effect using surprisingly few dots, a powerful self-portrait by Marc Chagall (far better than one might have thought possible), and at least two exquisitely delicate late watercolors by Cézanne, *Trees* (which is not in the catalogue) and *Still Life with Pears and Apples, Covered Blue Jar, and a Bottle of Wine*. The Cézannes certainly occupy the zenith of the exhibition, but perhaps the single most breathtaking item is Ingres's *Odalisque with Slave*, a copy in pencil, chalk, gouache, and gray and brown wash of the famous painting owned by the Fogg Museum at Harvard. Its combination of languorous sensuality and stupendous technical control—just look at the meticulous care with which Ingres has delineated the odalisque's flowing hair—makes the drawing a supreme masterpiece.

Among the many pleasures to be had from an exhibition of important drawings is the sense of intimacy and communion one has at such close proximity to the hand of the artist. This is especially precious at a moment when the importance of connoisseurship, taste, and first-hand acquaintance with works of art is being undermined by a proliferation of commentary, reproductions, "audio tours," and digitized simulacra—anything but the work itself. Great drawings are a great resource against this process of aesthetic degradation, as this remarkable exhibition reminds us. In one of the introductions to the catalogue, Mr. Thaw is quoted on this point. He notes that it is the "particular quality of drawings, their kinship to handwriting, which most attracts us to them as evidence of the authentic touch of the artists' own hand. In this age of computers, multiples, and other devices for graphic programming and duplication, the artist's

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hand seems to be getting less and less important. All the more reason to cherish such survivals from other times when the hand of genius was a sign of civilization." And all the more reason that we should be grateful to Mr. Thaw and to the Morgan Library for making this splendid record of genius and civilization possible.

A catalogue of the exhibition, handsomely printed by the Stinehour Press, has been published by the Morgan and is distributed by the University of Washington Press (280 pages, $37.50 paper).

—*Roger Kimball*

"Manny Farber: New Paintings"
at the Frumkin/Adams Gallery, New York.
September 16–October 15, 1994

The career of Manny Farber will one day be accorded more of a place in the cultural life of New York during the last half of the century than has lately been given it. Best known to an earlier generation as a film critic, and still much admired by specialists in film history for the writings that were collected in the volume called *Negative Space* (1967), Farber is also an accomplished painter, and it is to the art of painting that he has devoted his principal energies in recent decades. (I seem to remember that he also did a stint along the way as an art critic.)

If, as I dimly recall, Farber in his movie criticism seemed to have a special affinity for films dealing with the seamier side of American life, there is nothing at all *noir* about his paintings. His specialty for some years now has been the table-top still life in which the table surface, occupied by an array of objects from the daily life of the artist, becomes the picture plane parallel to the wall on which it hangs. The pictorial result thus combines the space of abstraction with the imagery of informal domestic realism. Or, to put the matter another way, Farber combines abstraction, in both its expressionist and minimalist varieties, with affectionately rendered images of fruits, vegetables, flowers from the garden, art books and hand-written notes from the studio, old tools, and, in several pictures, even some broken pieces of matzo, apparently a favorite food.

Each of the pictures, painted with a palette knife on panel, is bisected into equal rectangles or fields of color upon which the chance placement of colorful objects trace a three-dimensional counterpoint of beautifully articulated forms. Everything here is bathed in the brilliant light of Southern California, where Farber has lived since 1969, and as a colorist he has proved entirely equal to the challenges that this light poses for the painter's palette. As painting, the effect is an unexpected conflation of what might be called New York–style painterly facture—a kind of rough, gritty lyricism in the way the paint is laid on, even when painting a green pea or a red onion or a piece of matzo—with a lush, pleasurable feeling for color that at times attains an almost Fauvist intensity. It is as if the painter, having quit New York for a sunnier climate a quarter-century ago, carried with him his vivid memories of Abstract Expressionism and the minimalism that supplanted it, and populated them with his favorite objects of delight.

—*Hilton Kramer*

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Theater

A wilderness of mirrors

by Mark Steyn

One of the minor pleasures of *Show Boat* (to be discussed next month) are the play-within-the-play scenes, of rough-hewn Mississippi audiences engrossed in the hokey old melodramas that chugged their way across the continent for most of the last century. Next week, *East Lynne*? If only. As the summer tents are folded away and the fall seasons of the regional reps hit their stride, Hammerstein's affectionate show-within-the-boat spoofs remind you of a lush era when Ol' Man The'ter, he jus' kept rollin' along, week after week, story after story: not just teary tales of distant exotics like Lady Isabel Mount Severn and Sir Francis Levison, but the vast panorama of nineteenth-century life—in 1879, there were forty-nine companies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* alone, and hundreds of lesser dramas of railroads and land claims, sheriffs and preachers, hoboes and drummers. Now, Broadway audiences pay sixty bucks a pop to go to the Gershwin and watch a spectacular high-tech re-creation of hammy Victorian mellers in a revival of *Show Boat* which is this revivalist season's late, late wake-up call to the fabulous, slumbering invalid. As an image of theatrical withdrawal, it's hard to beat.

But it's not merely a matter of production activity. Where have all the plots and characters, where has all the *life* gone? Theater today holds a mirror mainly to itself. A few weeks ago, still convalescing from the current Broadway revival, I went to see *Damn Yankees* at the Weathervane Theatre, which sits on the edge of the woods a few miles out from Whitefield, New Hampshire, and is New England's northernmost barn theater. I was feeling in need of something innocent and summer-stocky, and there'd been a jolly magazine article by a local teacher who'd successfully auditioned for the company. Of course, it wasn't like that at all. Most of the players were struggling professionals from out-of-state and the evening began with the director urging us to drop some money in the Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS collection bins and wear a red ribbon. Well, I gave a couple of bucks, and so did a few other folks, but I didn't see anybody take a red ribbon. Aside from the fact that it wouldn't stand out against plaid, I can't think of anything sillier or more irrelevant or more blithely un-"aware" than wearing an "AIDS Awareness" ribbon in Coos County, a sprawling wilderness where the White Mountains fall away and the headwaters of the Connecticut dribble out to the Quebec plain. You could throw a giant chicken cook-out and have wild unprotected penetrative sex with everyone of either gender in the whole county and never contract HIV. AIDS, we are told, "is an epidemic that affects us all," but in Coos County, statistically, you're more at risk from a logging accident or from hitting a moose. ("Brake For Moose—It Could Save Your Life," warn the road signs. "Collisions This Year: 211.") There are no plays about logging or moose collisions or rural unemployment. At inter-

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mission, as we milled outside that barn in the cool evening air of the north woods, I looked at the company and I looked at the locals: which group would you say was isolated, insular, parochial . . . ?

At the theater these days, the most striking images are invariably offstage. Several first-act curtains later, I was at the Arena Stage in Washington for Terrence McNally's *A Perfect Ganesh*, a play about two women from Stamford, Connecticut, one of whose son has been queer-bashed to death and both of whom are touring India. This intermission we were again outside, this time in the theater's parking lot, with a sprinkling of diplomatic plates and the handicapped space occupied by a limo. Everyone was standing around making polite social chitchat, apparently deaf to the D.C. police roaring past, sirens screaming: fresh from Whitefield, New Hampshire, I seemed to be the only one who noticed.

At the Theatre Communications Group National Conference this year, Edgar Rosenblum of Connecticut's Long Wharf insisted that theater is as essential to life as any public service: "The fire department is *not* more important than art," he said. "If you will save people, what will you save them for?" But, viewed from the parking lot at the Arena Stage, the theater is a refuge from life. Conversely, in Whitefield, after dropping your money in the AIDS bucket and heading back to your Cape or trailer, life is a refuge from theater.

As to *Damn Yankees*, for the original 1955 production George Abbott wrote what's possibly the most irresistible song cue in musical comedy, a locker-room pep talk from the coach:

> "Now listen to me. This game of baseball is only one-half skill. The other half is something else. Something bigger."
>
> *Ding!*
>
> "You gotta have heart!
> All you really need is heart! . . ."

Substitute "theater" for "baseball" and there's the recipe which has kept Abbott, now 107, on Broadway for the last eight decades. In an age when our stage offers either the slick but unfelt or the honest but incompetent, we could all learn from the Abbott model: as he'd put it, peppy but not phony; or, if you like, efficient but true.

It goes without saying that in the new *Damn Yankees*, with its book "revised" by the director Jack O'Brien, these lines have gone missing. O'Brien's *Damn Yankees* doesn't have heart: it's a camp turn for Victor Garber as the Devil, plus some chorus numbers. O'Brien gets away with it (as other revivals have done) because of the strength of the material and our residual affection for it. The line that symbolizes the new *Damn Yankees*, and the dreary obsessions of the theatrical dead-end we're complacently painting ourselves into, comes during a scene in which the Devil and Lola are wandering through Limbo and gleefully chuckling at the great lovers of history—Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, J. Edgar Hoover and Clyde Tolson. It's not the cheapness of the shot (even last year's exhaustive "Gay Edgar Hoover" biography couldn't find any real proof of a physical relationship); it's not the expensiveness of the shot (why pay Broadway prices for a topical gag your morning disk-jockey or late-night talk-show host will give you for free?); it's the technical unsoundness of it: *Damn Yankees* is set in the Fifties, when Hoover and Tolson were very much alive. One reason why Abbott can write and stage anything—weepies like *Coquette*, farces like *Three Men on a Horse*, musicals from Berlin to Sondheim—is because he's open-minded about content and concentrates on form. O'Brien has to shoehorn this joke in: "They're not even dead," points out Lola. "I know," chuckles the Devil gleefully, "but I just can't wait." It gets a laugh, but it's a cheap laugh, at the expense of the play: half the score has Joe (the baseball star) yearning for the wife he's left behind, but O'Brien couldn't care less about this relationship. In rehearsal in 1955, Stephen Douglass (the

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original Joe) asked at one point what his motivation was. "Your salary," said Abbott, famously. I hope the current Joe is on a good salary, because O'Brien sure doesn't give him any other reason.

At the San Diego try-out, I suggested to Abbott he get the Hoover gag removed. But you can't blame a 107-year-old guy for not sitting in on every rehearsal, and the line made it to New York. It even made it to Whitefield (amazingly; I wouldn't have thought the O'Brien version was available for licensing), where, the biogs told us, one of the cast had just come from rehearsals in New York for *J. Edgar Hoover—the Musical*. What's the betting the title's as good as it gets? Just as it is for all the other Fifties shlock which so preoccupies Greenwich Village: *Space Bitch*, *Chorus Girls on Mars*, *What Would Esther Williams Do in a Situation Like This?*, *I Could Go on Lip-Synching*, and *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, to name a handful plucked randomly from one month in 1988 (I'm currently filing my *Playbills*). Across New York, Fifties chickens are coming out to roost. In Victor Garber's sly, bitchy reading, the Hoover/Tolson joke is delivered with all the withering scorn gays reserve for the chronically closeted. At *Angels in America*, Roy Cohn attempts a defense: he's not homosexual, he says, because a homosexual is, by definition, powerless; he's a heterosexual who happens to fuck men.

In the coded theater of the Fifties, it was the other way round: some of our greatest stage creations (see Tennessee Williams) were homosexuals who happened to fuck women. In *The Season*, William Goldman pondered whether having to write boy-meets-girl when you'd much rather write boy-meets-boy was why our leading dramatists had such a venomous view of marriage. How long ago it seems: "I have never read Williams' name in print in connection with any woman in any romantic way," Goldman ventures cautiously. "I'm not saying he doesn't have them lining up down the block." In New York today the nearest thing to a homegrown hit musical is *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and the nearest thing to a homegrown hit straight play (if you'll forgive the term) is *Angels in America*. In twenty-five years, we've gone from Williams's constrained masterpieces to self-indulgent wallows like *Hysterical Blindness and Other Southern Tragedies That Have Plagued My Life Thus Far*, a revue by a thespian gay about growing up a gay thespian. You can look on this as tremendous progress, or as proof that American theater is simply shriveling to its core audience. Kingsley Amis once compared atonal music to pedophilia: no matter how eloquently you argued your case, most people would still be disgusted. Theater and homosexuality are more literally synonymous and, if we're not careful, will invite the same indifferent shrug from a general audience: if that's what they want to get up to, fine; but it's not for me.

Hysterical Blindness is a silly campy title for Leslie Jordan's play, but, if you're looking for a diagnosis of modern American drama, it's spot on, neatly encapsulating both the paranoia and self-absorption of the contemporary stage. The most fêted American dramatist of the moment, Tony Kushner, is a man who believes in all seriousness that there are parallels between Nazi Germany and Reagan's America (*A Bright Room Called Day*, produced at the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1991). The Nazis, you'll recall, are the fellows who made you fill in a different numbered form according to whether you wanted to smash up a Jewish grocery store or raze a ghetto; Ronald Reagan is the President who sacked the air-traffic controllers. An inbred toothless mountain man from Coos County understands the difference instinctively. A playwright deals in words, and, when he disregards weight and meaning, scale and degree, he devalues his own currency.

A few years back, I remember standing transfixed by the banality of one farewell message on an AIDS memorial quilt: "Ready for my close-up now, Mr. De Mille." The thought that, facing death, all this man could find to sum up his life was a hand-me-

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down drag-queen cliché was almost unbearably sad. When so many of those consumed by AIDS see themselves in theatrical terms, dramatists have trouble returning the compliment. Early AIDS plays liked to take an inventory: the glands, the sweats, the lesions. More recently, authors have turned to a sort of *deus ex machina*: in Kushner's *Angels in America*, AIDS prompts a heavenly visitation; in McNally's *A Perfect Ganesh*, it's the Indian deity Ganesha. Both men seem to be struggling to ennoble and dignify the disease. *Angels in America*, a "gay fantasia," is fun because it's epic. But AIDS is epic *and* banal—and the latter is too awkward for writers to confront, especially when they're concerned to be well-intentioned. *A Perfect Ganesh* is so *nice* that the Arena Stage can't think of any way to bill it except as a "compassionate Washington-area première." First seen at the Manhattan Theatre Club last year, the play creeps a little closer to Broadway in Laurence Maslon's bold staging. McNally is the librettist of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and he's written a musical-sized play. This makes sense for several reasons: first, these are the only kinds of new plays that are big enough for Broadway—witness *Angels* and (more gays) *M Butterfly* (which was commissioned as a musical); besides, when it comes to people speaking naturalistic dialogue in representational sets, the theater can't compete with TV and movies; and, in any case, as the least memorable aspect of most new musicals is the score, why not give audiences all the big gestures, the presentational storytelling, the design concept, the choreography, without any of the dull tunes? In *A Perfect Ganesh*, mother and son even duel in song cues: "So sue me—that's from *Guys and Dolls*." "Shut up and dance—that's from *Gypsy*." You want to widen your frame of reference—that's from me.

The first image in the play is the entrance of the god—a big blubbery figure topped by a pink elephant's head. It is foreign and intriguing, but not for long. Ganesha is the narrator, a dramatic shorthand, but he's guiding us through familiar territory. "We have to decide when we want our first laugh," McNally once said at a Dramatists' Guild lecture. "It's how you get your first laugh that sets the entire tone of the play." McNally's first laughs here come at the Air India check-in desk—the usual thing, missing reservations, a larky clerk; the plane's going to India but the play's heading for sitcom country. On the flight, Ganesha and the ghost of the dead son are sitting on the wing. "Fag?" says Ganesha. The boy looks startled, but then sees that he's being offered a cigarette. "The Raj is ended," explains the god, "but the melody lingers on."

The satisfaction of this joke is in its precision. Indian English has its own particular cadences and rhythms: if you're a Scotsman or a New Zealander and you read aloud a column from *The Times of India*, it almost always comes out sounding like an impersonation. In this four-handed cast, all the Indian parts are played by either a person of color (African-American) or a person of non-color (white), which wouldn't matter so much if McNally had any ear for Indian English. But he doesn't. The one bit of British Imperial slang he's bothered to pick up is a word which, in American English, means gay. McNally will forgive us if we draw our own conclusions about his dramatic priorities.

This is the point. It's not that the Indian hotel manager says "another bloody re-run" when the word should be "repeat" or that he sings "Here she comes—Miss America!" when he'd never have heard the Miss America theme because India has a booming film and TV industry and music business of its own. Anybody can nitpick about words and phrases here and there; it's what they, cumulatively, signify: that, in almost three hours, McNally has been unable to conjure an Indian character except in American pop-cultural terms. Oddly enough, this is the chief characteristic of the gay prisoner in McNally's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, who sees his life in movie fantasies. He's in jail, and it helps him get through it. What's McNally's excuse? The gay son, fine; the two guys with AIDS, very persuasive and "compassionate." But, with the natives, you can almost sense

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his frustration that the poor schmucks can't trade licks from *Gypsy*. At the opening, Ganesha pulls down a schoolroom map and explains, for anyone who doesn't know what India is, that in 1947 it achieved independence and "full membership of the British Commonwealth of Nations." This straightforwardness is charmingly disarming for both the informed and ignorant. But you wonder, too, if McNally is not also educating himself. He flies us to India, then plays "Moon River" when we get there. It's the equivalent of those tourists who go to France and eat Big Macs—or those Tin Pan Alley hacks who wrote songs about Zulus in Samoa when they'd never been south of Canal Street. Go back to David Belasco, a playwright without an ounce of McNally's wit or insight, but you marvel at the worlds he opened up on stage. Listen to McNally's characters and it's the sound of a theater talking to itself. On my way to Whitefield, the waitress in Bethlehem, New Hampshire, told me that she wasn't one for the theater, but that, when she's sick, she likes to get out the videos of *Gigi* and *My Fair Lady*. She and McNally's gentle "compassionate" play aren't so very far apart: it's theater as a sentimental retreat from life—Lerner when you're low.

George Abbott is old enough to have worked for Belasco. Recently, I asked him if he remembered the first play he ever saw. He did. It was a knockabout ragtime show in Cheyenne, Wyoming, in the 1890s, and it made him want to be a part of the theater. The first play he ever wrote, at college, was about a man who worked down manholes—a nice theatrical idea. The first play he ever re-wrote was *Lightnin'* in 1918, written by Winchell Smith and Frank Bacon and fixed by Abbott so well that it became the longest-running play in American history until overtaken by *Abie's Irish Rose* seven years later. It's about a boozy teller of tall tales who owns a hotel on the California/Nevada border: there's a line drawn across the lobby so that guests coming to procure a divorce don't find themselves in the wrong state. It's a play for everybody. We are all minorities: Indian hotel clerks, New Hampshire loggers, HIV-positive show-tune quoters. A theater that loses interest in all but a few select minorities is doomed. After this year's Tony telecast, Frank Rich suggested in *The New York Times* that next year's show should be written and cast by Tony Kushner, George Wolfe, Wendy Wasserstein, and Stephen Sondheim. He meant this to sound liberating and exciting. Instead, he only emphasized how blinkered and restricted is our view of what theater is. That's fine for the theater's approved minorities: gays, blacks, Jewish feminists, and Sondheim fans. What about everyone else?

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The media

Nothing if not "cynical"

by James Bowman

Occasionally you still see them, those now torn and weather-worn bumper stickers from two years ago that were President Bush's favorites: "Annoy the Media: Re-elect Bush." Well, it turned out that there were other ways to annoy "the media," whose generally liberal and activist sympathies have not been proof against annoyance with President Clinton either.

Even in 1992, public suspicion of the media was based on a more general sense of alienation from those who serve up the news. This alienation has been both cause and consequence of the rapid growth of information exchange by computer and radio phone-in shows. As Christopher Wood, New York Bureau Chief of *The Economist*, wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* last month, apropos of the press's reluctance to cover stories related to the Whitewater affair: "A media elite centered on Washington and New York talks to itself while the rest of thinking America listens to the radio and draws its own conclusion."

How, then, to account for the fact that President Clinton has been complaining, not without justification, of the general tone of negativity in the press coverage of his administration? On the one hand we have a degree of sycophancy so great as to be embarrassing to the press itself. Thus *Newsweek* has kicked Eleanor Clift, one of the most slavish Clinton partisans, upstairs from the White House beat and made her a contributing editor, while *The New Yorker* has likewise reassigned Sidney Blumenthal, hiring as his replacement Michael Kelly of *The New York Times*, who has been one of the most trenchant critics of both Mr. and Mrs. Clinton. On the other hand, the President has been inviting journalists round to the White House for iced tea and cookies and off-the-record conversations about what he has described as the "fault-finding mentality" of the media.

Of course there is no necessary contradiction here. It could be argued that the media are simply polarized as never before into pro- and anti-Clinton factions. And it is certainly true that apologists for Clinton tend to be as blind to his faults as his most vehement critics are blind to his virtues. But those critics are mostly outside the dominant media culture, which is split not between pro- and anti-Clintonites but, like all popular-front coalitions, between ideological purists and political realists. The Cause is the same for both, and is sufficiently energizing that the White House finds it natural to expect the support of the press while the press finds it no less natural for its support to be solicited.

A particularly striking illustration of these expectations came during the course of the administration's efforts to pass the crime bill, which were taking place concurrently with the President's informal chats with journalists. When Peter Torkildsen, a Republican congressman from Massachusetts, said in an

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interview on C-SPAN that a White House assistant, Susan Brophy, had offered to make an effort to obtain for him favorable coverage from the Boston media in exchange for his support on the bill, it was only a slight stretch to believe that she could actually deliver what he said she said she could—namely a laudatory column from Tom Oliphant, a regular columnist with *The Boston Globe*.

Ms. Brophy denied it. "I most assuredly did not say that to him," she said, although Torkildsen had a note from her in which she certainly *had* said, "I will make calls to Boston media on your behalf." Oliphant himself was wild with indignation at the charge that he might be considered a mere shill for the administration and compared the allegation to a McCarthyite charge of Communism. In a joint appearance with Torkildsen on WHDH radio in Boston, he angrily branded the congressman a liar to his face: "You're a liar. You got it? A liar. You got caught. You got caught lying . . . Excuse me, you lied . . . You're now trying to weasel out of it, and I'm not going to let you do that."

It was a clear case of protesting too much. Torkildsen had not "got caught" at all, merely contradicted, and on his side were three powerful pieces of evidence besides the note from Ms. Brophy promising to "make calls" to the media on his behalf. One was the long acquaintance, extending back into the young woman's childhood, between Oliphant and Ms. Brophy, whom he described last year as a "heroine." The second was the column that Oliphant had actually written when Torkildsen voted against the bill, in which he had called the congressman "a smarmy . . . shadow-seeker" trying to hide the fact that he had "succumbed to the pressure" from the NRA. The third was the testimony of Torkildsen's fellow Massachusetts Republican, Peter Blute, who says that the same offer was made to him.

Moreover, though Blute insists that he had already decided to vote for the bill before the offer was made, when he did so, Oliphant wrote a column praising his "courage." It makes you wonder how Oliphant could be so sure—so sure as to call a United States congressman a liar to his face—about what Ms. Brophy had or had not promised in his name. For him to insist, as he did, that "I had no contact with anyone in the White House about Congressman Torkildsen's vote, period. Ever," was beside the point. And the heat of his indignation was perhaps owing to an uneasy consciousness that no contact would have been necessary. So predictable were his sympathies that Ms. Brophy could have promised with absolute confidence that Oliphant would do precisely what in fact he did do without there having been any collusion between them whatsoever.

Paradoxically, it could have been the same reflexive willingness to line up on the President's side which led to a series of thumb-sucking pieces on the "cynicism" and "negativism" of the press in reporting on the Clinton administration. No one seems to have noticed the curious contradiction in the press's widespread agreement with a criticism of its criticism of the President, voiced by the President himself! As Susan Page of *Newsday*, one of his guests at the iced-tea-and-cookies sessions, had it: "Reporters have been negative, judgmental and sometimes inaccurate in covering his administration, he says . . . But he also has blamed himself for failing to recognize that he had to adjust his campaign style of communicating."

Such disarming humility seemed designed to appeal to the journalistic readiness to believe that "communication" and "style" are what matters chiefly in governing—to say nothing of their readiness to believe the claim of one Thomas Patterson of Syracuse University, whose book, *Out of Order*, the President brandished at them, that Clinton was "a president who should have acquired a reputation for fulfilling his promises." Jacob Weisberg made a similar assertion in *New York* magazine and insisted that it was entirely on account of "the pounding administered by the press" that the President was no more popular (40 percent approval) than he

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was. And while acknowledging that the man is not necessarily a paragon of trustworthiness, Weisberg insists that "voters mistrust Clinton in part because the media keep telling them not to trust him."

Poor, helpless Bill Clinton! The victim of so many vicious critics of his integrity! Meanwhile, of course, his own critical tendencies have hardly been suspended. In a speech on health care, he attacked critics of his and his political allies' plans for reform by impugning their patriotism and suggesting that their only possible motivation must be that "we don't want cheaper health insurance, we don't want healthier people." Needless to say, no one wasted any tears on the hurt feelings of the anti-reformers, but the enthusiasm with which journalists took up the cry of "cynicism" and "negativity" was remarkable.

It ranged from the opinion of H. Brandt Ayers, editor and publisher of the *Anniston* (Alabama) *Star*, that criticism of President Clinton was tantamount to a breakdown of civility in public discourse, to that of Meg Greenfield of *The Washington Post*, who rather feebly claimed that "cynicism" (by which she meant only skepticism) was good for you. But there was none so bold as to suggest that Clinton had got his just deserts. Most were closer to Ayers, who was afforded back in July the place of honor on *The New York Times*'s op-ed page to proclaim nothing less than "the death of civility." That delicate flower had been done in, he thought, by a "hatred of unprecedented violence being directed at the White House" and fully competent to "damage the Presidency itself."

Others were not far behind him. Sydney Schanberg in *Newsday* thought that the whole Whitewater business is a deplorable example of the extent to which there is now, since Watergate, a "permanent suspicion of the presidency" leading journalists to seek wrongdoing where there is none. Anthony Lewis in *The New York Times* complained that the President's right-wing critics "breed a corrupting cynicism about the very idea of government" and that Rush Limbaugh, by his "hateful talk" about the President, "is really trying to destroy public faith in our institutions." David Broder in *The Washington Post* detected "a deterioration in the tone and quality of public discourse in this country" and claimed that it is in the interests of politicians and press alike to fight against the "cynicism" that "is epidemic right now" and is drawing the press "into a downward spiral of cheapened values and lost respect."

Peter Boyer in *The New Yorker* sees attacks by the editorial page of *The New York Times* under Howell Raines on Mr. Clinton—particularly on his and others' behavior in connection with the Whitewater affair—as a kind of betrayal. It is not that Raines himself, whose combination of liberal ideas and anti-Clinton rhetoric is seen as a personal idiosyncrasy, owes anything in particular to Bill Clinton. But it seems to Boyer, as to many in the administration and at the newspaper too, almost inconceivable that a liberal Democratic president should not be able to count on the support of *The New York Times*—let alone that he should be compared by it to the likes of Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon. When Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, Jr., publisher of the *Times*, came to lunch at the White House and was asked about the editorials, he replied, Boyer reports: "The best way of describing our relationship with you is 'tough love.'"

Clinton is supposed to have laughed and said: "Well, just don't forget the love part."

As if he could forget it! The press's acknowledgment of its own sourness and "cynicism"—something it would never have admitted to when it was attacking Ronald Reagan or George Bush—was evidence enough of that. Yet Gerald Seib in *The Wall Street Journal* repeatedly lamented the way in which "political debate" on both, increasingly partisan, sides "has degenerated." Seib was particularly dismayed that such degeneration seemed likely to sap confidence in journalism as well as in politicians. Opinion polls show that even fewer Americans (21 percent) have confidence in the honesty of the press than the number who have con-

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fidence in the honesty of Bill Clinton (37 percent).

Thus it is, he thinks, that "the press is caught up in a rampant wave of national cynicism, in which confidence in virtually every national institution is dropping." This he attributes to the fact that, "in an era of Gennifer Flowers scandals, lots of Americans seem to think that the *National Enquirer* and 'Hard Copy' tabloid TV shows are in the same business as daily newspapers and network news divisions." As in the old story, we can only say to Mr. Seib: "You mean they're not?" As we look back at a year dominated by the stories of Tonya Harding, the Bobbitts, the Menendez brothers, and O. J. Simpson, Seib's pathetic attempt to distinguish his high-minded and totally serious corner of the business from such trash looks like a joke.

Concluding that the press's "thrashing" of Clinton disproves the widespread belief in its liberal bias, he cites with approval the theory of Kathleen Hall Jamieson of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania that this mysterious miasma of cynicism comes from "the press's tendency to report not on the substance of public debates but on the strategic maneuvering and attacks of participants," which suggest that "all players are simply pursuing their own selfish interests." Fancy that! Imagine such a thing as a politician who is pursuing his own selfish interest instead of being a disinterested devotee of the public good! It looks to me as if it is rather the naïveté of the press's critics than the cynicism of the President's which is remarkable.

Nevertheless, the impression that all these writers have of a largely critical press has received support from an unexpected quarter. The research of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, run by S. Robert and Linda S. Lichter, is usually cited by conservatives as upholding their allegations of liberal bias, but the Lichters concluded in a study published at the end of August that Clinton had, in fact, received much more critical treatment from the press during his first eighteen months in office than did George Bush. Nearly two-thirds of the television network news reports on Clinton, which the Center slices and dices and classifies as part of its job, were found to be negative about the President and his policies. If the obviously partisan sources are taken out (that is, the politicians and officials of either party whose loyalties are proclaimed in advance), nearly three-quarters of the network sound bites were anti-Clinton.

How to reconcile this fact with the partisanship on behalf of Clinton of the likes of Eleanor Clift or Sidney Blumenthal, Michael Kinsley or Tom Oliphant? For one thing, what such people and the lamenters of cynicism and the end of civility direct their criticism toward is scandal-mongering. But the Lichters' study counted among the negative stories only 6 percent which were concerned with matters of character, while 79 percent were concerned with issues of policy. "For the administration generally, as for Mr. Clinton personally," says the report, "most of the bad press concerns substantive policies."

Lichter himself, in an interview with Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post*, explained it thus: "We've hit the point where the coverage is so nasty and there's so much of it that it's produced a qualitative difference in the way people feel about their president. There's a feeling that this guy is a scoundrel because there's such a hostile media environment. He's had the misfortune of being president at the dawning of an age that combines attack-dog journalism with tabloid news." Jonathan Yardley in *The Washington Post* does not disagree with this but adds a series of explanations of his own, ranging from the President's Southern accent to the way he looks in running shorts.

But part of the explanation lies in another of the Lichters' data: that news coverage of the Clinton administration was much more extensive than coverage of President Bush during the same period of his administration. In terms of the number of stories, Clinton attracted 44 percent more attention

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from the networks, and, in terms of the amount of air time, the figure is nearly 62 percent. What this divergence should suggest is that expectations of President Clinton were much higher than those of President Bush. Journalists and editors of largely liberal sympathies greeted his administration by turning their magnifying glasses on him in unison, sure that there would be better and more interesting stories to tell than they had had under previous administrations. When Clinton proved to be no more competent a leader—and maybe rather less competent—than his predecessors, the sense of disappointment was correspondingly great.

Yardley puts the same sense of disillusionment in personal rather than ideological terms. He finds the root of the press's disappointment in their inability to get over a thirty-year love affair with the memory of JFK. "The only two Democrats elected president since the fall of Kennedy's chosen heir, Lyndon Johnson, were men who chose to run as Kennedys manqué." When neither of them turned out to be Kennedy indeed, the press turned on them: "Hell hath no fury like a journalist whose illusions and longings have been bared and betrayed. Hence we have the unseemly spectacle of grown men and women assailing Clinton with all the blind, irrational anger of jilted teenagers."

This seems to me unconvincing. Their willingness to engage in a sort of Maoist self-criticism over their own cynicism does not suggest "blind, irrational anger." The Story about Bill Clinton is not that he has tried to be John Kennedy and failed but that he has tried to be Bill Clinton—the Bill Clinton who was sold to the electorate in 1992—and failed. Or perhaps not failed. Either way, The Story is determined by expectation: the more the event diverges from the expectations which the press had about it in advance, the better the story. This is the point of the classic example of the newsworthiness of Dog bites Man *vs.* Man bites Dog.

Thus the first version of The Story about a President who started with high expectations *must* be a story of failure. And then, when the failure has ceased to be unexpected, The Story will again become one of success, as it already has in the eyes of Jacob Weisberg. And if his view that Clinton "has been more faithful to his word than any other chief executive in recent memory" seemed just a little far-fetched to most of his colleagues, the consensus Story was still that of the well-intentioned man whose idealistic projects were being foiled by (1) his right-wing critics and partisans with merely selfish motives or (2) his own limitations as a man and a leader.

It is still not clear whether (1) will continue to hold the upper hand over (2) or whether The Story will change to one focusing much more sharply on the limitations—and how they were kept hidden from the world. But things have now gone too far for journalistic exegetes not to continue to apply their interpretative ingenuity to the bare Clinton narrative. This is the one point on which everyone seems to agree. For another reason why Clinton is seen as getting a bad press from his ideological sympathizers is that commentary—positive or negative—is more often expected from news reporters these days. Confronted with the Lichters' findings by Howard Kurtz, Bill Wheatley, vice president for news at NBC, "pointed to the explosion of news analysis in the last two decades"—and added that "since analysis inevitably gets into the problems a president is having, that may be at least partly responsible for the 'negative' coverage."

Such a view is related to Kathleen Hall Jamieson's that reporting on political strategies (which involves interpretation) breeds cynicism or Jacob Weisberg's that "saturation coverage has driven the more prestigious outlets toward a kind of political movie reviewing." Weisberg agrees with the opinion of Tom Rosenstiel, who writes in *The New Republic* that it is all CNN's fault for always being first with the news and leaving other outlets to compete on the basis of analysis and interpretation. "Even though no one watches CNN," writes Weisberg, "the nightly news feels it has to put an edge of

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judgment on. And the papers have to take it a step farther."

This may be true. But what none of those seeking to explain Clinton's poor press seems to have considered is that the negative coverage may have been owing to the fact that there was negative news. Yardley writes of the Lichters' finding that nearly three-quarters of TV coverage from not avowedly partisan sources was negative that it is "a figure so gross as almost to defy comprehension" on the part of supposedly "objective" and "unbiased" news programs. It never occurs to him that they might in fact be sufficiently unbiased as to have reported objectively that Clinton was doing a lousy job. This is not because Yardley himself is biased but because of the assumptions he shares with an increasingly intellectual and self-conscious and self-important "journalistic community" who believe that whatever happens happens because of them—their ideas, attitudes, prejudices, and sympathies.

And increasingly this is true. In a Kantian or Coleridgean sense, the media more than ever "half-create" the news that they report—as the faculty of imagination becomes more important in the reporting. It would be well if they would remember from time to time, however, that reality—the reality outside themselves—still has at least *some* part to play in deciding what is the news.

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Books

Fantastic Argentine

by Alexander Coleman

Generalizations about contemporary writing from Spanish America are neither advisable nor recommended for general use. There is nothing coherent to be said about the literary production of twenty distinct countries, where the situation of the writer, the place accorded literature in that society, and the author's particular response to the societal and political mix are a special case in each instance, applicable not even to a neighboring country. This is so in spite of the fact that Spanish American authors all seem to write in the same language and have a common history of conquest, colonization, and apparent liberation from the political and cultural models that were Spain's legacy from the age of discovery. Though such things are not known or acknowledged in the U.S.A., it is good to keep in mind that an Argentine arriving in Mexico is a Martian to most Mexicans, as is a Cuban arriving in Chile—utterly different worlds on all fronts. All the more reason for insisting on specificity when talking about a particular author today.

For instance, within the Peruvian context, where literature is rarely granted any distance from society, and where fiction is more likely to be valued for its documentary value than for its imaginative qualities, it was logical that Mario Vargas Llosa would feel compelled to offer his candidacy for the presidency of Peru. Vargas Llosa is a devourer of reality, a manic Flaubertian, scrutinizing and exposing the fossilized structures of Peru's authoritarian feudalism. But unlike Flaubert (although similar to other Peruvian writers before him), he possesses a messianic compulsion to cure the nation of its ills by his own magisterial hand—a vocation for martyrdom. Writers turning into politicians and failing miserably are an old story in parts of Spanish America, and literature is not the better for these dalliances. In any case, it was a Peruvian phenomenon, not readily replicable elsewhere. For instance, a "committed" writer such as the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, who apparently has ideas similar to those of Vargas Llosa, has always insisted that the only social responsibility of the writer is to write well, and that's that. He has consistently refused (and there have been many) offers of ambassadorships, consulates, and possible candidacies for the presidency of Colombia. He's been wise to do so.

If generalizations are perforce shaky, it is nonetheless true that the North American reader does have an *impression* of and about contemporary fiction from Spanish America, more likely than not drawn from a recent and cursory reading of a few works of, say, García Márquez or Isabel Allende. Such an impression, nebulous and vague as it is, is widespread, and it always seems to point to a kind of performance practice which distinguishes Spanish American fiction from its North American counterpart, and this in turn relates to the uses and misuses of the fantastic. It would seem that most American

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readers are under the impression that the only mode practiced in Spanish America is something called "magic realism," or, to use another term, coined by the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier, "the marvelous real." The two terms mean quite different things, but no matter; for the North American reader, the terms have come to be equivalent. García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the touchstone for this visionary literature. Examples abound therein. Along with the many gory and exorbitant events in that novel, Father Nicanor Reyna levitates twelve centimeters above the ground upon sipping a cup of chocolate, while Remedios the Beautiful is swept up into the heavens accompanied by a gaggle of airborne bedsheets. Many readers have taken these magical episodes as examples of a piquant fancy, suggestive of the author's addiction to medieval chronicles and chivalric novels. This is very much to the point, since García Márquez has always expressed his contempt for slice-of-life literature and for European realism in general, and has tended to veer toward adventure stories, fairy tales, and children's literature as nurturing elements for his own writing—the world of the romance. Most occasional readers of Spanish American fiction have taken this style as the coin of the realm, as if fantasy, hyperbole, and dream were always present.

Historically, just the reverse is the case. Since the first recognizable novel in all of the colonies was not published until 1816 in Mexico, the founding novels of the nineteenth century in each of the newly independent nations were born under the successive novelistic aesthetics of what then reigned in France and Spain—romanticism, realism, and, markedly, naturalism. In these novels, Nature itself—or rather the unequal contention between man and nature—was the protagonist. Zola was a hidden master behind these novels, which came in many guises and have had many labels in the histories of the Spanish American novel—the "novel of the earth," "the protest novel," "the *indianista* novel," "the novel of the Mexican Revolution"—and they carried on a hardy existence in across the continent until well into the 1940s. García Márquez, whose grand novel was published as recently as 1967, was one of the first of today's writers to lament the persistence of parochial realism in Spanish America. Things could have been quite different in terms of literary evolution had Spanish American writers reached back to pre-nineteenth-century, even medieval, models:

> The authors of chivalric novels succeeded in inventing a world in which the imagination was possible. The only important thing for them was the validity of the account, and if they deemed it necessary for the knight to have his head cut off four times, it would be cut off four times. This amazing capacity for inventing fables penetrated the reader of that period in such a way that it became the emblem of the conquest of America. The sad part is that Latin American literature should have forgotten so soon about its marvelous origins.

If García Márquez and his contemporaries (Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, and Mario Vargas Llosa, to name a few) represent the new canon that has spead *urbi et orbi* throughout college curricula as "representative" of the Spanish American novel, the old canon survives only as subject for revisionist readings and an exemplar of historical interest.

One of the main agents in displacing the old with the new was the Argentine novelist and essayist Adolfo Bioy Casares. Born in 1914 in Buenos Aires, he found himself in such fortunate financial circumstances that he was able to dedicate himself to a writing career, with the passionate encouragement of his littérateur father. His older friend and compatriot Jorge Luis Borges (b. 1899) had similar luck—a well-off family and a father who, frustrated by his own lack of literary talent, poured his unrealized ambitions into his son. The two met for the first time in 1932, and although they were always to be quite different as writers, a unique friendship developed over the years which resulted

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not only in their reviewing and commenting upon each other's literary production, but also in their jointly creating a "third party," an author dubbed "*Biorges*" by one of Borges's biographers.

The two collaborated in five works of fiction, most of them parodies of detective stories modeled on their avid readings in Chesterton and Conan Doyle. They also produced (with Silvina Ocampo) an anthology which was to make its mark on the future of much of Spanish American writing, the *Anthology of Fantastic Literature* (1940), where Lewis Carroll abuts Cocteau, Alexandra David-Neel, and Kafka, and Lord Dunsany finds himself in the company of Chuang-Tzu, Saki, and Swedenborg. The editors included one of Borges's finest early short stories, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (where Bioy Casares appears as a literary character on the first page of the story—the purported reader of the false, pirated encyclopedia which in due course gives birth to the invading planet Tlön). Bioy Casares also put his name on the truculent prologue to the anthology, which is as much a manifesto as anything else. He there notes that in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" Borges "created a new literary genre, part essay, part fiction. This new genre of Borges is an exercise in a rigorously applied intelligence and felicitous imagining, a story without padding, without the 'human element,' neither emotional nor heart-rending, all aimed at intellectual readers, students of philosophy, some specialists in literature."

In a similar vein, Borges and Bioy Casares, during a long conversation one afternoon in 1939, compiled a list "of what was to be avoided in literature." The anathemata included "works in which the real protagonist was the pampa, the virgin jungle, the sea, a deluge, or monetary profit," or "works which have situations with which the reader identifies," or "works which pretend to be menus, albums, itineraries, musical concerts"; also, works "which ask for illustration, which suggest films." It should be added that Borges and his friend had the good sense to pull their own legs and include, in their list of prohibitions, works which "include in their plot development vain plays with time and space as found in Faulkner, Borges, and Bioy." During this same conversation, Borges described to Bioy Casares the outline of one of his finest literary spoofs, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote."

Throughout the groves of academe, more than a few doctoral dissertations are surely in preparation concerning the multiple significance of this friendship, which ended only with the death of Borges in 1986. In his "Autobiographical Essay," Borges recognized the complexity of their relationship and made a telling remark about the debt he felt he owed to the younger writer:

> It has always been taken for granted in these cases that the elder man is the master and the younger his disciple. This may have been true at the outset but several years later, when we began to work together, Bioy was really and secretly the master. . . . Opposing my taste for the emotional, the sententious and the baroque, Bioy made me feel that quietness and restraint are more desirable. If I may be allowed a sweeping statement, Bioy led me gradually to classicism.

As Borges's biographer Emir Rodríguez Monegal noted in his lengthy discussion of the relationship, Bioy Casares published his most famous work, *The Invention of Morel*, with a prologue by Borges, just a few weeks before the publication of the "fantastic" anthology in November 1940. Like Bioy's manifesto for the anthology, Borges's prologue to his friend's work rails against the psychological novel in general and its most particular manifestation—the Russian novel, with Dostoevsky probably the principal target. Borges finds such novels to be loose, baggy monsters, as did Henry James, but in terms unique to his own perception of the nature of literature: "The Russians and their disciples have demonstrated, tediously, that nobody is impossible. A person may kill himself because he is so happy, for example, or commit murder as an act of benevolence.

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And one man can inform on another out of fervor or humility. In the end, such complete freedom is tantamount to chaos." Turning to Bioy Casares's rigorously plotted novel, he places it on a level of achievement equal to any other work of the time or of the previous few decades:

> I believe I am free from every superstition of modernity, or any illusion that yesterday differs intimately from today or will differ from tomorrow; but I maintain that during no other era have there been novels with such admirable plots as *The Turn of the Screw*, *Der Prozess*, *Le voyageur sur la terre* (of Julien Green), and the one you are about to read, which was written by Adolfo Bioy Casares.

A selection from the fiction of Bioy Casares has just been published by New Directions.[1] The deft translator of these stories, Suzanne Jill Levine, points out in her introduction that while H. G. Wells's novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) provided the point of departure for Bioy Casares, *The Invention of Morel* should not be taken as mere science fiction. Alfred Mac Adam described *Morel* as "a text about a man who becomes first an artist and then a work of art." The plot is simple: a fugitive, shipwrecked on an island, spies on an alluring group of elegant vacationers who fill their days with drink, fine talk, a good selection of records of the Twenties, and innumerable games of tennis. He soon becomes enamored of the *belle dâme* of the group, Faustine. As he observes all of them over a period of weeks without his presence being noted, he realizes that they repeat every conversation, every move and gesture, cyclically over a fixed stretch of time. They have died, or have been killed, after having been filmed in three dimensions by the sinister group leader, Morel. Finally concluding that what he sees is a kind of continuous holographic film loop whose projected images have bulk and move about the island as if alive, the fugitive determines to master Morel's invention (powered by the fluctuation of the tides) so that he will be able to intercalate himself into this revolving time machine of images. He wants to stand (or lie) next to the already pre-programmed Faustine, who will of course never know of his presence. Intimacy will be denied him, but the anguishing approximation of it is better than nothing. The young lover forever on the brink of possession, encased in a work of art, has some consolations—Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" being the classic formulation.

Bioy Casares's brief novel represents the proto-artist who is at once writing in a diary (inscribing on the urn, if you will) and making himself into a component part of (and a collaborator on) an art object, a permanence of images. *The Invention of Morel* is one of the first instances of a movement away from representation in literature in Spanish America. By the way, the work attracted the attention of Alain Robbe-Grillet, who reviewed it in *Critique* in 1953; in can be seen as a subtext to his screenplay for the film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). Robbe-Grillet admitted to as much in an interview. He tells how, after the première of the film, a friend (Claude Ollier) called to congratulate him on his achievement, but began with a memorable exclamation: "Mais, c'est L'Invention de Morel!" At any rate, Bioy Casares has hardly been idle since then. Aside from the collaborations with Borges, he has published some fifteen books—novels, novellas, and short stories—along with a number of critical articles in Argentine journals; he has also continued on as a sometime anthologist. One of his more mordant works of recent years is his *Dictionary of the Exquisite Argentine* (second edition, 1990), a compilation of barbarisms and pompous anglicisms that have crept into daily use in Buenos Aires. The growing corruption of meaning in daily language usage has always been a major concern.

By now it is probably impossible to extricate the name of Bioy Casares from its as-

1 *Selected Stories*, by Adolfo Bioy Casares. Translated from the Spanish, and with an introduction, by Suzanne Jill Levine. New Directions, 176 pages, $21.95.

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sociation with Borges and his work. They are, howevever, quite distinct writers, though they both share a penchant for the metaphysical and the sense of life-out-of-mind-and-body. But Borges always had a leaning toward the epic sense of life, what with his celebration of Walt Whitman, his addiction to the major films of the "Western" genre, his espousal of *Ulysses*, his avoidance of the intimate tone, his real aversion to the confessional aspects of literary expression. On the contrary, Bioy Casares "tends toward the lyrical," in the words of Ms. Levine, with a special attention to Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and especially Verlaine, authors who find little favor indeed in Borges's eccentric pantheon. Furthermore, Bioy Casares's stories flow in realms that Borges would never acknowledge as proper for his own writing.

All of the pieces in the present collection are taken from four books dating from the mid-1950s through the late 1980s; they revolve around the subject of love, which manifests itself in a hallucinatory and obsessive way within each story. Most of the pieces are variations on the theme of *l'amour fou*, described in an offhand and oblique way that makes each character something of a phantom, a mental event rather than an evolving person on the page.

The most intriguing thread running through these stories is the repetition of a kind of child's adventure tale, only eroticized: each story rehearses a search for the beloved across space and time which more often than not ends in grinding frustration and a hallucinatory dénouement. Bioy Casares's art draws upon the world of the child as a diagram for the deceptions and disillusions of adulthood. Still, the child remaining within always has the option of returning home to the cozy world of uncomplicated parental affection. In a brief chronology of his life written in 1975, Bioy Casares recalls that in early childhood, at around age five, "my mother [told] me stories about animals who stray from the nest, are exposed to danger, and in the end, after many adventures, return to the security of the nest. The theme of the safe, or apparently safe, haven, out of the dangers that lurk outside still (in 1975) appeals to me." The way this plays out is elusive; the stories tell of events in a monochromatic stream of time without much tonal variation or carefully prefigured surprises within the ongoing flow of things. The machismo of the errant male, a favorite target, is subverted, put at a loss, while women's sensibilities and questing are no luckier but are seen in an immensely more generous light. Like the protagonist of *The Invention of Morel*, Bioy Casares's people are losers, they are always out of joint. Often physically together, "adjoining" each other as it were, they are at an unbreachable psychic distance.

For instance, in "Women Are All the Same," a young wife, over the objections of her much younger suitor, allows her elderly husband to intern her in an insane asylum; she thereby "achieves security," suggests Ms. Levine, "by making fidelity into a form of suicide." In "Men Are All the Same," a young widow leaves her lover in favor of a much younger man; she later discovers that her new husband is interested in her only because of the splendid automobile she lets him drive. In "Pearls Before Swine," a woman's passion for a young gentleman goes wholly unrequited; only years later does the man come to see that he has thrown away his one chance at love in his lifetime. In "Dorotea," a father's search for his estranged wife in the south of France ends in his finding his daughter, but not his wife. She has died, and the daughter is now unreachable and distant. What might have been ends in frustration and isolation. Bioy Casares's fluent manipulation of time and space is evident in "About the Shape of the World" and "The Hero of Women," but these are not "escapist" pieces; the political realities of Argentina intrude throughout. "The Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice" is based on the torching of Buenos Aires's elegant Jockey Club by enraged *Peronistas*. Inside the political anecdote, the story tells of a dramatic and failed search for love as the

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hordes plunder this bastion of the old aristocracy. As in Borges, dream is the bedrock of Bioy Casares's reality. Ms. Levine quotes Borges to good effect on this matter: "Nobody knows whether the world is a natural process or whether it is a kind of dream which we may or may not share with others."

Robbe-Grillet said of *The Invention of Morel* that it was "un livre étonnant," which might be variously translated as an "astonishing" or "amazing book." It is most certainly that—a revelation—and should be read anew by every generation. The stories in this collection, however, are not at that level of intensity; they artfully echo Bioy Casares's major achievement of 1940, exploring the obsessions implicit in the earlier masterpiece. Still, that should be more than enough to explain why Bioy Casares is now Argentina's most distinguished living man of letters and is considered a founding father of the new novel in all of Spanish America. When Carlos Fuentes noted that "without Borges, there would be no new Spanish American novel," he misspoke—he should have said "*Biorges*."

Wording the pulse afresh

Jim Powell, translator
Sappho: A Garland.
The Poems and Fragments of Sappho.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux/Noonday,
65 pages, $15; $9 paper

Christopher Middleton and
Leticia Garza-Falcón, translators
Andalusian Poems. From Spanish
Versions of the Original Arabic.
David R. Godine, 86 pages, $30

reviewed by D. S. Carne-Ross

Speaking of what he called "the awesome lustre of Sappho's simplest words," Kenneth Rexroth once asked, "Is it there or do we read it into her fragments?" and gave his answer: "Partly it is a function of attention. If you isolate two sentences of a skillful description of passion or of Nature and say—'pay attention, these are by the greatest lyric poet who ever lived,' the mind will find values in them which may have been there, but which would normally have been passed over." A high claim, but readers have often pitched their praise of Sappho at this height. Enough to scare translators away, one might think, yet they keep coming, most recently Jim Powell.

No fully satisfying version of any of her longer lyrics has ever, to my knowledge, been written, but single lines or brief fragments have sometimes come across into English. Sometimes:

> O you rosy-armed Graces, hallowed Daughters of Zeus, be here!

So Jim Powell. Guy Davenport, allowing himself three lines, perhaps succeeds:

> Graces O with wrists like the wild rose,
> Chaste and holy daughters, come,
> Come among us, daughters of God.[1]

Sappho is more approachable in the one example of narrative verse that has partially survived, a poem about the marriage of Hector and Andromache. Some broken lines tell of a herald called Idaios, running perhaps, a swift messenger, then something about Asia, then "undying fame." Powell renders the first nearly complete six lines in this way:

> Hector and his companions escort a
> dartingeyed
> woman from sacred Thebë and fair Plakía's
> streams,
> delicate Andromache, aboard their ship
> on the salt sea, and with her many gold bracelets
> and scented purple robes and intricate
> adornments,
> silver goblets past numbering and ivory.

1 *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, translated, with an introduction, by Guy Davenport; University of Michigan Press, 1965.

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This "woman" may well be no more than fifteen or so, but Powell is just minding his P's and C's. Her adjective, *helikōpis* in Greek, means either "dark-eyed," which prudent translators settle for, or "with rolling eyes." Powell is bolder. Compound epithets of the Greek type are however not readily formed in English, and for every success—Milton's "flowry-kirtl'd Naiades," Tennyson's "many-fountained Ida"—there are all too many failures. "Dartingeyed" should go back to the button-moulder. Apart from anything else, if you say the word, you are likely to find that the final letter of the first element attaches itself to the second element, leaving poor Andromache darting-geyed.

Among the bride-gifts she brought were "intricate adornments," Powell tell us. What exactly are these objects, what do they look like? Curiously wrought trinkets perhaps, or possibly toys, but whatever they are the translator needs to embody them, something that this translator is little inclined to do. "Beds of soft luxury," for instance, is verbiage; why not follow Sappho and write "soft beds"? "Intricate headband"—no picture there. Or, Powell's favorite adjective again, "intricate sandals/ covered up her feet." The Greek word *maslēs* is now conjecturally taken to mean sandal, but this is hard to accept since sandals have an openwork upper and can hardly be said to "cover up" the feet. Not that a visual difficulty of this sort is calculated to faze Powell. He could have found help in the prose translation by D. A. Campbell in the Loeb *Sappho and Alcaeus*: "a gay leather strap covered [her?] feet." Livelier English and better sense.

Davenport rendered the first part of the marriage poem in this way, keeping his eye on the Greek while taking the liberties he needed to make it come alive, sometimes translating not so much the words as the occasion. What marks it, he decided, is not simply excitement but wonder, wonder at the unfamiliar objects the bride has brought with her:

> Crying Asia! that famous place,
> The messenger came from his dust.
> Crying Ektor! the winded runner
> Silver with sweat, laughing, Ektor!
> Ektor comes from that famous Asia,
> From its strange towns with his friends.
> They bring home a black-eyed girl
> From Theba the high on the Plakia,
> The graceful, the young Andrómakha.
> They come in the ships on the ocean.
> For gifts they bring wrist-chains of gold,
> And purple coats and silver jars,
> And carved toys incredibly strange,
> And things made of ivory.

Lovely and outlandish these gifts from across the water or over the hill seem to the folk of a place-bound archaic culture, very remote from our global village where we all use and take for granted the same dead consumer products.

In the next readable part of the fragment Sappho describes how girls sang their welcome to the bride, and "the women who were older raised a joyful cry" (Powell). What sort of cry? The Greek is more specific, for the verb Sappho uses, *eleluzō*, identifies the sound as the ritual *eleleu*, the loud joyful call of women addressing a divinity. Anne Pippin Burnett, in a scholarly study of Sappho, writes "and matrons repeated the alleluia."[2] Better, but rather too sedate. Davenport goes all out with "Dancing grandmothers shout the marriage song." Taking his liberties indeed! members of the Where-is-this-in-the-Greek school exclaim. License you mean when you speak of liberty. A lesser license than Dryden took in the great days of the art when he says of Agamemnon in his slanging match with Achilles in the first book of the *Iliad*, "And Foam betwixt his gnashing Grinders churn'd." (Homer merely says that he was angry—very angry, the context makes clear.)

It is with the lyrics that the translator is most severely tested. Powell leads off with the ode to Aphrodite, trying for a rhythmical pattern that matches Sappho's line, while replacing Greek quantity with English stress.

2 *Three Archaic Greek Poets: Archilochus, Alcaeus, Sappho*; Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 222.

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"Nobody seems to have mastered the lady's metre," Pound remarked. He might have allowed some success to Swinburne, who wrote a few stanzas that come closer to the movement of her line than anyone else has done:

> Saw the white implacable Aphrodite,
> Saw the hair unbound and the feet unsandalled
> Shine as fire of sunset on western waters;
> Saw the reluctant
> Feet, the straining plumes of the doves that
> drew her . . .

Powell aims for the same movement, building his line where he can round the choriambic unit –∪∪–. Choriambs are very good things to be sure, in the right hands. In Tennyson's: "The blue fly *sung in the pane*; the mouse . . ." It is not clear that they do much for Powell. Here is his version of the first stanza of the ode:

> Artfully adorned Aphrodite, deathless
> child of Zeus and weaver of wiles I beg you,
> please don't hurt me, don't overcome my spirit,
> goddess, with longing.

The attempt at metrical fidelity does him no harm when it is not detectable. "Don't overcome my spirit" is a natural run of English words needing no help from the metrical grid –∪∪–∪–∪. The same cannot be said of these lines from another famous ode in the same metre :

> but my tongue breaks down, and then all at
> once a
> subtle fire races inside my skin, my
> eyes can't see a thing . . .

The final "a" and "my" imperiously demand to be moved forward to the line that follows, leaving one with ordinary blank verse, a trifle lame perhaps, but better than the verses that Powell gives us.

There is a question too about his diction. His aim, he writes, is "to re-create the feel of [Sappho's] poetry in contemporary American English." He achieves this aim with "please don't hurt me," today's humble *sermo pedester*, not when he writes "weaver of wiles," which can only be described, charitably, as poetic. "Artfully adorned," however, is neither poetic nor does it form part of any conceivable prose utterance. "You are artfully adorned this evening, my dear." Hung about with bangles, scarfed in fabrics of subtle hue? The adjective that Sappho uses of the goddess, *poikilothronos*, has traditionally been understood to describe an elaborate throne or chair on which she is sitting. A more attractive, certainly more translatable, interpretation, first made over a hundred years ago and now being canvassed again, takes the second element of the compound to be not *thronos* but *throna*, embroidered flowers. Much better, giving us not a stately enthroned divinity but a more vivid figure, on her feet and face to face with her votary. It is this interpretation that Powell appears to accept, but he quite fails to take advantage of what it offers, the image of Botticelli's pensive goddess, naked Anadyomene about to be clad in the flower-inwrought robe as she comes ashore on her scallop-shell. "Sappho's Aphrodite is Botticellian," Davenport notes in the sumptuous preface to his translations, and the same may be said of his own. Powell's goddess lays claim to no such elect descent.

To adapt something that A. E. Housman said about one of his own papers: I do not think these translations bad; I think them not good enough for Sappho. Powell need not however repine, for if he has failed, others have failed before him, others will fail after him. Were there a manual called *Tips for Translators*, it would include this saving counsel: Leave Sappho alone. Yet this would be to leave her all but unknown since so few people now read Greek. The alternative presumably is to leave her in the keep of scholarship, which, having largely completed the task it is qualified to perform, bringing her fragmentary or battered poems to about as readable a state as they are ever likely to reach, has strayed over into what it believes to be criticism and is busy diminishing the value of the gift it has

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granted us by maintaining that the emotions and occasions she writes about are purely literary and conventional.

There is another possibility. Let dedicated spirits resolute enough to seek out poetry wherever it is to be found spend a few months acquiring enough Greek to make their provisional sense of what is left of Sappho's work. Only a little Greek is needed for there to start glimmering on the far side of the half-understood syllables something that no translation will ever give them, something to the order of

> and in th' ascending Scale
> Of Heav'n the Starrs that usher Evening rose.

Routine translation could then cease, leaving the ground clear for poets capable of coming up with a miracle now and then.

Christopher Middleton, a very well-schooled poet of no school except his own, is, like Davenport, a gifted verse translator, but there the similarity ends, for Davenport, a founding member of the tribe of Ezra, approaches his originals circuitously and could never say what Middleton and his collaborator Leticia Garza-Falcón say in their introduction to *Andalusian Poems*: "We did our utmost to translate with fidelity: our translations are not imitations or paraphrases."

Here, however, they have to enter a qualification, for they were working not from the Arabic originals but from scholarly Spanish translations. Hence (they write) "whenever we suspected that a move in the Spanish betrayed, identifiably, an Arabic peculiarity of some kind, we would look into it and if possible develop it. Sometimes this meant weeding out, if only provisionally, some parts of the *décor* that Arabo-Andalusian poets lavished on their utterances. *Once we had made the heartbeat audible and worded afresh the original pulse*, we could replace decorative features with the proper animation." I italicize some words to point to the felicity of their definition of the translator's task.

One might expect that versions conjured up via intermediaries from a language unknown to the translators would be no more than aleatory fictions or blurred pastiche. No. The poems in this book, written in our time and yet not of our time, have a tang of lived life and seem to breathe the air of some timeless present.

Much of the delight of this Arabo-Andalusian verse, dating mostly from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, is due to the way phenomena are constantly submitted to an agile play of metamorphosis. As in Sappho, girls seem crossbred with flowers:

> When with a languid look she'd shake off
> her robe,
> Like a ray of light surrendering her body was.
> The very air around her shivered with desire.
> It was a rose opening out of a rosebud.

Or with fruit. "The Quince" begins

> Yellow its color
> As if it wore
> A daffodil slip . . .
>
> Naked in my hand
> Under its daffodil slip
> It made me think of her . . .

Human and natural seem part of a single process, as though they had never been riven. Branches interlace across a stream like the limbs of lovers; a tailor puts stitches in a silk cloak and "His needle, like a shooting star,/ Leaves a trail of light"; eating one's way to the heart of an artichoke becomes the dangerous passage to beauty:

> . . . her haven
> Hard of access, a Greek
>
> Virgin, who lingers
> Behind a curtain of lances.

By a gay and charming conceit, a squall tears a river's tunic and laughing doves poke fun at its thick froth overcoat. In "Galley Oars," serpents, "there since Noah's day," sensing a rise in the water level, push out their tongues through the holes.

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There is little that resembles this in English poetry. Distinguishing between fancy and imagination doesn't take one far, and the light-fingered wit and artful insouciance of tone and phrasing are a far cry from the *discordia concors* of the Metaphysicals, the yoking together of heterogeneous ideas, for the Arabo-Andalusians are not intellectual; their analogies are immediately present to the senses, not elaborated by the mind. Moving outside the English field, one may be led to think of the Góngora of the great cultist poems, the *Polifemo* and the two *Soledades*, but there is a significant difference. These Spanish Arabs leave the first term, the tenor, intact: the quince preserves its quinceness, the artichoke remains an edible object. But when in the *Polifemo* Galatea, lying beside a stream, suddenly jumps up, what Góngora writes is *segur se hizo de sus azucenas*, "she made herself the sickle of her lilies"—the lilies of her body. The first term, Galatea, is in the process of being eliminated, her cool white person replaced by the flowers falling beneath the blade.

Góngora's poetry of the second term, as one may call it, is more complex and more extreme than anything to be found in the Arabs. Sometimes, though, for all its sensuous immediacy, their poetry is more complex than it seems, leading the translators to speak of the "cultivation of exquisite surfaces as conduits of deep structure." A poem called "The Dove" begins:

> The surprise of my life:
> On a bough between
> Isle and river a dove
>
> Cooing . . .

The bird belongs to the natural world, yet precious inorganic substances have gone into its making ("lapis his breast . . . pupils of ruby . . . eyelids/ Of pearl . . . trimmed with gold"), transforming it into an aesthetic object, a work of art.

> Black the point
> Of his beak, like
>
> The tip of a reed
>
> Dipped in ink.

A work of art that itself creates the artwork of its occasion, for the reedy tip of the dove's beak is (like) a pen with which it writes the poem of the dove. The poet, however, is not a passive spectator, for his heart goes out into the object he observes. Moved by the surprise, the shock, of this experience, he weeps, and the bird, scared by the sound of his sobs,

> Spread wings, beat them,
> Took as he flew my heart
> Away. Where? I know not.

The bird has gone, the poet is left heart-less, drained. The fugitive moment of aesthetic response has passed, but the poem remains.

These poems speak from a very brilliant world, unknown but not unimaginable. Lyrically the translators invoke it for us, as though they had just come back: "There were the flesh tones, torchlight, buildings of every shape and description, white, pink, or blue, there were cooled interiors, scandals in the taverns, songs in the streets . . . and there were prominent cities, well-watered by aqueducts: the moon rose over cities more splendid, with their fountains and minarets, than any to be seen in Europe at that time." A male world where "men like lions,/ Warriors live, as in wild beast's den," but also one in which "great-eyed women freely speaking their minds" played a full part. Freely indeed, to judge from one remarkable anonymous poem. The lover, what Rabelais calls a "dolenz contemplatif amoureux," intones the standard hymnody of praise and desire, until the final stanza. "Come see me," he has said, "woebegone as I am." Then, "but O/ her words amazed me so," the beloved replies. "She instructs him how best to see her, tell[ing] him to bring muscle and agility to bear upon the prospect of her backside":

> "See me if you wish, no trouble,
> Only bend my body double,

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Tie each pendant tightly to a bangle—
That, *señor*, will have to be your angle."

A sprightly freedom from pudeur unthinkable in older Western love poetry—imagine a canzone of Petrarch ending in this fashion, and not likely to be handled so well by today's liberal shepherds.

A brilliant world but a perilous one. Reports of sacked cities press in on these pages, of barbaric armies looting and raping, death in battle, decapitations, a lover crucified. Violence is accepted as part of the deal, too readily, sometimes, for our squeamish, murderous time. Watching a girl's white fingers play along the strings of her lute is as exciting as the moment when "a sword hits and clips/ Clean through the sinews of a foe in combat." It is the fact that life here is lived so close to the dangerous edge of things that makes the strong sensuality of these lyrics serious and keeps it from becoming cloying. A curtain of lances bars the way to the beloved.

Andalusian Poems is a richly pleasurable, very beautiful book, a beautiful physical object too on which the publisher, David R. Godine, is much to be commended, with the poems, set in Renaissance chancery italic, standing shapely on a long lean page. This is also a useful book. As Middleton and Garza-Falcón remark at the end of the introduction: "Poems have ways of defying terror and between episodes of terror ways of testing the wind." Since no one can now be sure when or where terror may next break out, this is a work to keep by you. Just in case.

Kaleidoscopes of feeling

T. S. Eliot
The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry.
Edited, and with an introduction,
by Ronald Schuchard.
Harcourt Brace, 343 pages, $29.95

reviewed by Paul Dean

It was largely thanks to John Middleton Murry that T. S. Eliot was invited to give the prestigious Clark Lectures at Cambridge in 1926, and largely thanks to A. L. Rowse's indiscreet loan of *Poems 1909–1925* to a high-minded colleague that Eliot failed to be elected to a fellowship at All Souls, Oxford, where he could have fulfilled his intention to turn the lectures into a proper book. He never did so, and although they have been referred to and deferred to in the books of others for over sixty years, they only now appear in print, edited and annotated with exemplary meticulousness by Ronald Schuchard. They are followed by the Turnbull Lectures Eliot gave at Johns Hopkins in 1933, which were a scaled-down version of the Clark Lectures with one or two additional passages. Even by 1926 Eliot's most influential early essays—including "The Metaphysical Poets" and "Andrew Marvell," in which his ideas had been tried out—had all been published, but in scope and coherence this book tells us something new about metaphysical poetry, and also, perhaps more intriguingly, about Eliot's own poetry.

A very crude outline of Eliot's argument would be as follows. Metaphysical poetry had three efflorescences: in Dante's Italy, Donne's England, and Laforgue's France. These periods witnessed a poetry in which a precarious equilibrium was struck between conceptual thinking and emotional expressiveness. By "metaphysical," however, Eliot does not imply "philosophical": on the contrary, metaphysical poetry is marked by an absence of abstraction. (Eliot alludes scornfully to "the pseudo-science of epistemology.") Donne, despite his occasional use of scholastic terms, was no late-medieval thinker, hardly a systematic thinker at all; but, in jesuitical fashion, he examined his own ideas until they became the objects rather than the products of feeling, in a language which is at best a sensitive instrument of psychological notation, at worst morbidly self-regarding, squeezing the emotion from the idea.

In the age of Dante, the union of thought and feeling was the vision of God—hence the poet's relationship with the beloved was contemplative, its eroticism free from nar-

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cissism: the idea, expressed in Donne's "Ecstasy" (which Eliot analyzes in rare detail for him), that love "interinanimates two souls" would have been unintelligible to Dante, who prayed to be united with, not merged into, God. Donne's goal of ecstatic oneness is ultimately sterile; he is "imprisoned in the embrace of his own feelings." Dante's austere poetic diction yields, in the work of Donne and others, to a style characterized by contortion and obscurity; the image which clarifies experience is replaced by the image which diversifies it, and the goal of thought becomes diversity rather than coherence. Passion loses its intensity in the widening concentric circles of intellectualizing, and "Donne is the great ruler of that borderland of fading and change."

Nonetheless, when his diction and versification are at their best, Donne's transmutation of experience into thought, which is then in turn the object of new feeling, reflects a mind attaining Keats's "negative capability," or as Eliot put it in his essay on Marvell, "a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible." In considering Donne's satires and elegies here, Eliot makes remarks which we cannot help applying to his own work:

> We watch a strange kaleidoscope of feeling; with suggested images, suggested conceits, the feeling is always melting, changing, into another feeling; we get a kind of unity in flux, which is Donne. There is no *structure* of thought, but every thought is felt, every image has a peculiar feel to it.

And later:

> Donne is a poet, a true poet, perhaps even a very great poet, of chaos. And this fraction of thought into thoughts means that the only thing that holds his poems, or any one poem, together, is what we call unsatisfactorily the personality of Donne. In this, he is a modern poet.

But this means that in the longer forms, above all in the *Anniversaries*, Donne the "voluptuary of thought" is a poet of brilliant fragments, that the poems lack organic unity.

Eliot turns from Donne to Crashaw and Cowley. Crashaw united the mysticism of St. Theresa—in which divine love is a substitute for human love, a procedure again foreign to Dante's mentality—with the conceits of Donne, using thought as a neurotic, indeed hysterical, stimulus to feeling, or rather as an insurance against ceasing to have feelings, practicing an aesthetic of the grotesque in which the conceit becomes an end in itself. Cowley, the subject of the essay in which Dr. Johnson coined the term "metaphysical poets," inspires in Eliot an intense dislike; Cowley ushers in decadence, assembling dismembered bits of Donne's phraseology like a literary Frankenstein, but he is incapable of animating them or of recreating the characteristic movement of Donne's verse. However, his ode "Of Wit" defines a key critical concept in ways that implicitly rebuke Donne for schematicism, without weakening the term "wit" as Dryden was to do. After Cowley, poetry ossified into poetics, feeling coarsened into sentiment, thought slackened into rumination, and the metaphysical element died out (Blake is admitted as a possible exception) until nineteenth-century France. Unlike most of their English counterparts, French writers were willing to take seriously the concepts of good and evil, which they observed in Byron (discounting his frivolity) and Poe (who has never counted for anything in England). Thus we arrive at Baudelaire: and with him at the possibility of Laforgue and Corbière. Here it is useful to turn to one of the passages unique to the Turnbull Lectures, in which Eliot pays a touching tribute to these poets, saying that when he first read them

> it was a personal enlightenment such as I can hardly communicate. I felt for the first time in contact with a tradition, for the first time, that I had, so to speak, some backing by the dead, and at the same time that I had something to

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> say that might be new and relevant. I doubt whether, without the men I have mentioned —Baudelaire, Corbière, Verlaine, Laforgue, Mallarmé, Rimbaud—I should have been able to write poetry at all. . . . Without them, the Elizabethan and Jacobean poets would have been too remote and quaint, and Shakespeare and Dante too remote and great, to have helped me.

This being so, Eliot's cursory discussion of this tradition is disappointing, albeit full of tantalizing hints: it is here that we most regret his failure to work up the lectures into book form. Laforgue—no cynic, Eliot stresses, interestingly in view of a common misreading of his own Laforgue-inspired work—was a Dantesque soul doomed to live in the wrong time, who experienced "continuous war between the feelings implied by his ideas, and the ideas implied by his feelings": the result was a self-critical irony and—again with a clear relevance to Eliot himself—a "sacrifice of his art and his mind before an insoluble problem," the problem of reconciling intense romanticism and intense cerebration. If Laforgue is the Donne of the third metaphysical age, Corbière is its Crashaw, dwelling on the individual word, juxtaposing dissimilar tones in a searchingly ironical way—and "real irony is an expression of suffering."

Behind Eliot's account of metaphysical poetry lies, as he himself says, a view of the history of belief and its disintegrations (the note at the end of Section II of his essay on Dante is relevant here), and underlying that a theory of social change—"development" would be misleading, since Eliot assumes a decline. We write of Dante's belief in Aquinas, Donne's belief in Anglican theology, but of Laforgue's "belief" in Schopenhauer: the inverted commas are irresistible, although, to quote the essay "The Metaphysical Poets," "A Philosophical theory which has entered into poetry is established, for its truth or falsity in one sense ceases to matter, and its truth in another sense is proved." As the unity of belief fragments historically—the Reformation being the great watershed, the consequences of which are still being worked out in our pluralistic and relativistic world—so the likelihood of an artist's attaining intellectual coherence recedes. In the absence of commonly acknowledged standards, it is unlikely; in the absence even of an agreement that some standards are necessary, it is virtually impossible.

Such is the situation faced by contemporary poets. But perhaps I should remind myself that, as Eliot stresses in the final lectures in both series, the literary critic cannot without impertinence or naïveté pronounce on sociology or politics—a caution Eliot did not always heed himself—since his right to speak comes not from specialist knowledge but from a feeling for words. When the critic is also a poet—whose function is "to bring back humanity to the real," a religious function whether the poet is religious or not—his estimation of the importance of other poets will be doubly different from that of the literary historian, who seeks a rank order and a scale of comparative value. "The greatness of any artist depends upon the future."

The inevitable question proposes itself: is Eliot a metaphysical poet by his own definition? When he delivered the Clark Lectures he was the poet of "Prufrock" and the 1920 quatrain poems—which show the influences of the seventeenth-century English poets and of Laforgue at their strongest—and of "The Waste Land" and of "The Hollow Men," a poem that voices a despair so terrible that it could be answered only by collapse or conversion. By the time he delivered the Turnbull Lectures, Eliot had also written "Ash Wednesday." The first of the *Four Quartets*, "Burnt Norton," was three years away. Those who see the *Quartets* as Eliot's culminating achievement will acclaim them as masterpieces of the union of thought and feeling such as he discerns in the poets he studies in these lectures: those who find the earlier work more powerful will urge that Eliot's real thinking was done there, the *Quartets* at their weakest representing not

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thought but its appearance only, "associative procedures" to use F. R. Leavis's phrase, which don't build to a total conceptual significance. The more flexible, leisurely manner evolved by the later Eliot is prone, as his earlier elliptical tautness never was, to padding and to inertly rhetorical elaboration; what issues may be genuine precision, but it may also be donnishly self-indulgent. One can apply to the *Quartets* what Eliot says of Donne's *Anniversaries*, that their unity may ultimately be personal rather than intellectual.

The difficulty, too, of deciding how useful the musical analogies are is involved in weighing up the quality of thought. Eliot's essay "The Music of Poetry" has always seemed to me an illuminating commentary on his own work in its admission that a long poem needs less strenuous passages "to give a rhythm of fluctuating emotion essential to the musical structure of the whole"; and perhaps this points to something debilitating, devitalizing, in the *Quartets*, which occurs when Eliot is neither feeling nor thinking but believing himself to be doing so. He aspires, both personally and poetically, to a Dantesque union of the human and the divine rather than to a Donnean merging of the two: but when he comes out with

> The hint half guessed, the gift half understood,
> is Incarnation

he invokes an abstraction that his own equivocal attitude to physicality, elsewhere in the *Quartets*, further undermines. We can't help thinking how differently Donne regarded the physical—because of *his* understanding of the incarnation.

The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry sends its readers back in this way to its author as well as its subjects, prompting us to re-think our view of how language can embody, or on occasion disembody, meaning. With the aid of Professor Schuchard's annotations we can set the lectures in the total context of Eliot's work. They are the products of a mind well-read and well-trained beyond a level that most of us can aspire to, and of a spirit whose scruples, inhibitions, and torments yield profound insights as well as ineradicable contradictions. Like the poems, they sometimes mistake rhetoric for logic, but they compel our intellectual participation as few contemporary works of criticism do—because they issue not from a professional academic but from a creative artist.

Shorter notices

David Clarke
The Architecture of Alienation:
The Political Economy
of Professional Education.
Transaction Books, 203 pages, $29.95

There has never been a shortage of grumps and grouches in the architectural profession. The tradition of public grievance begins with Vitruvius, who sought a privileged standing for architects above masons and craftsmen. In recent years, with the irruptions of postmodernism and deconstruction, the steady growth in such literature suggests a pervasive sense of disenfranchisement from the public. David Clarke, while not altogether convincing as architecture's curmudgeon-at-large, provides some startling insights into the reasons for architecture's relatively deserved isolation.

Clarke's book is composed of two long and two short essays, followed by a series of "Little Manifestos"—brief reviews and notes published between 1974 and 1991. Each of the major essays represents a variation on the subtitle's premise: that architectural education, and indeed professional practice, is a market activity and is subject to substantive distortions when the market process is misunderstood or willfully ignored. The first essay represents an informal attempt (despite the author's seemingly rigorous methodology) to quantify investment *vs.* consumption spending in contemporary American architectural education—that is, the amount of time and money each student is forced to spend on courses dedicated ostensibly to generating professional return as

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opposed to "gut" courses. The second essay is a historical and descriptive (and rather rambling and redundant) account of the travesties of centralized bureaucracy for architectural education in France. The next essay, "The Marketplace and the Academy," discusses the unintentionally salubrious effect of market forces on the reorganization of the University of Salford in England.

The final essay, gratuitously entitled "Frank Lloyd Wright and the Laffer Curve," is the meatiest selection of the volume; it contains *in nuce* all the arguments of the other essays and "manifestos." Taking the stance Brent Bolin developed several years ago against conscious exploitation of "arty" architecture, Clarke notes that "potential clients run around with genuine and warranted fear in their bellies that their architects will foist art on them when what they really want is a nice building." While this appears to be a philistine appeal to the lowest common denominator, Clarke indicates that media careers like Michael Graves's are brought forth by "a demand-driven market caused by quantities of people insecure and wealthy enough to drive the market or let their idea of the market drive them." However, this is the flip-side of the coin: there has always been a market for sensitive and skillful design, but architecture schools find it far easier to indulge in the qualitative equivalent of television's "Star Search." To be a "star" in the profession of architecture today, one must be highly skilled at developing three-dimensional projections of the politically correct flavor of the month. A comprehensive critique of these politically correct distortions of the aesthetic marketplace would have made Clarke's book invaluable.

While a free-market or classical liberal perspective is certainly a rare and welcome voice in the profession, I was frankly disappointed with Clarke's largely intuitive grasp of economics. Considered as a branch of the "moral sciences," architectural education could be significantly enhanced by a serious application of the Austrian School of Economics' methodological insights: an understanding of the evolution and function of knowledge in the marketplace, an appreciation of the epistemological weaknesses of the planning mentality, and the virtues of modesty when attempting to fill a market demand. In short, Clarke's message would have been far more effective had he chosen the role of Friedrich von Hayek instead of Andy Rooney.

—J. Duncan Berry

Wendell Berry Watch with Me.
Pantheon, 210 pages, $21

Like all of Wendell Berry's previous fiction, this new book of stories concerns the farming community of Port William, Kentucky, and each of its members' relation to the land, the Lord, and the common good. It displays all the many virtues we have come to associate with this writer, among them a kind of Shaker craftsman's way with the declarative sentence and an utter absence of irony about values such as honesty, fidelity, and obligation. It also, unfortunately, displays many of his equally well-known vices, especially a tendency to idealize his farmer heroes and to sentimentalize the rural life.

Ptolemy Proudfoot, the chief actor in these stories, is Mr. Berry's most idealized, most sentimentalized creation yet. He is, in fact, the most *everything*—the biggest, the strongest, the kindest, the thriftiest, the most connected to the land and therefore the best of the Port Williamites. Or, I should say, he *was*, for he died in 1943, at the biblical age of seventy, and in these stories is always spoken of in the past tense. They don't make men like Tol Proudfoot any more—perhaps, it is tacitly suggested, because our times are not good enough for them.

"Ptolemy Proudfoot," Berry writes, "was nothing if not a farmer. His work was farming, his study and passion were farming, his pleasures and his social life occurred in the intervals between farm jobs and in the jobs themselves. He was not an ambitious farmer—he did not propose to own a large acreage or to become rich—but merely a

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good and a gifted one." "His lambs and his steers almost always topped the market. His harvested corn gleamed in the crib, as clean of shuck and silk as if Tol had prepared it for a crowd of knowledgeable spectators, though as like as not he would be the only one who ever saw it." He was also "a good hand to break a colt, and he had been known to take an older horse that was spoiled or mean and settle him down to a life of useful citizenship. People knew that in his dealings with horses Tol could accomplish pretty much what he wanted or needed to, and without so much as raising his voice."

As a figure of folk tale, a kind of comic-ballad embodiment of Kentucky Country Goodness, Tol is more than adequate to Berry's purpose, and in five of these seven short stories, Berry is writing nothing more than folk tales—yarns expressly designed to charm. Here are happy new variations on certain stock storytelling situations: the unlettered farmer wins the heart of the schoolmistress; the good wife mistakes her good husband for a sinner; the oh-so-shrewd hayseed turns the tables on the condescending city slickers. But in the other two stories, Berry is not content to let Tol remain a folk hero. He stretches the fabric of his creation by taking him out of the world of myth and into the world we call real—with decidedly different results in each case.

The weakest item in the collection is the ambitious title story. "Watch with Me" is the tale of Thacker Hample, the strangest of an eccentric local family, an unpleasant young man who is plagued by days when he is "sad and angry and confused and maybe dangerous, and no one [can] help him." One afternoon he presents himself at church and tells the preacher he is going to deliver the evening's sermon; Tol is enlisted to talk him out of it. Next morning Hample visits Tol, silently takes his loaded ten-gauge out of Tol's workshop, and disappears with it into the woods. At great risk to his person but without hesitation, Tol sets out to keep watch on Hample, an adventure that will take him through a sleepless day and night, sometimes in the company of several equally good and selfless Port William menfolk. The chase ends next morning back at Tol's workshop, where Hample corners the men and, shotgun in hand, delivers his postponed sermon. His text is Matthew 18:12: "How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray?"

This is, on first reading, a moving climax to the story: Hample is so obviously that lost sheep, his plea for help so naked and so poignant. But on second reading, one sees that it doesn't resolve the dramatic tension so much as dissolve it. Hample does not need to be brought back into the fold: Port William has always loved him as one of its own. The men do not need the sermon: they are blameless, having acted as model Christians from the outset of Hample's crisis. When after the sermon Hample and the men, in great good humor, sit down together for a community breakfast, one pleads with Berry to go easy on the molasses.

Berry redeems himself, however, in the book's remaining offering. "The Solemn Boy" is neither an amusing folk tale nor a clockwork Christian allegory but a classic American short story, the work of a master at the top of his bent. It concerns Tol in old age, laboring alone in his best field, shucking and cribbing perhaps his last crop of corn, and pushing on as a gentle snow falls. It concerns Tol's encounter, on the way back from the field, with a down-and-out man and boy, homeless travelers whom Tol brings in and feeds and warms and then releases with regret into the dying daylight. As an evocation of one man's love for the world, his knowledge that he is soon to leave it, and his realization that, as he is without a child of his own, his family line will end with his death, "The Solemn Boy" strikes one as an American reimagining of *The Leopard*. That it can bear comparison with Lampedusa's masterpiece suggests the rare, authentic mellowness that Berry can achieve—when he keeps his sentimental vices in check.

—Christopher Carduff

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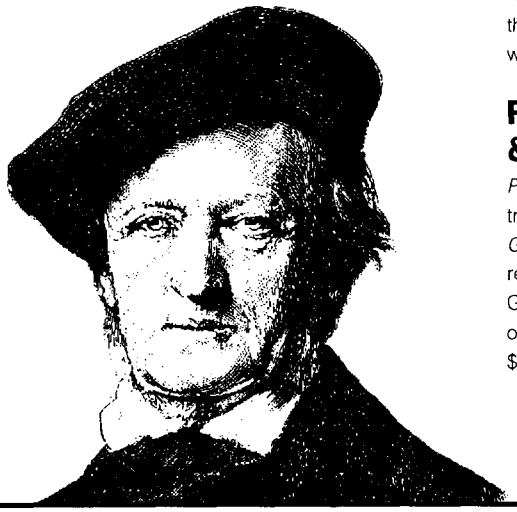
Richard Wagner

Translated byWilliam Ashton Ellis



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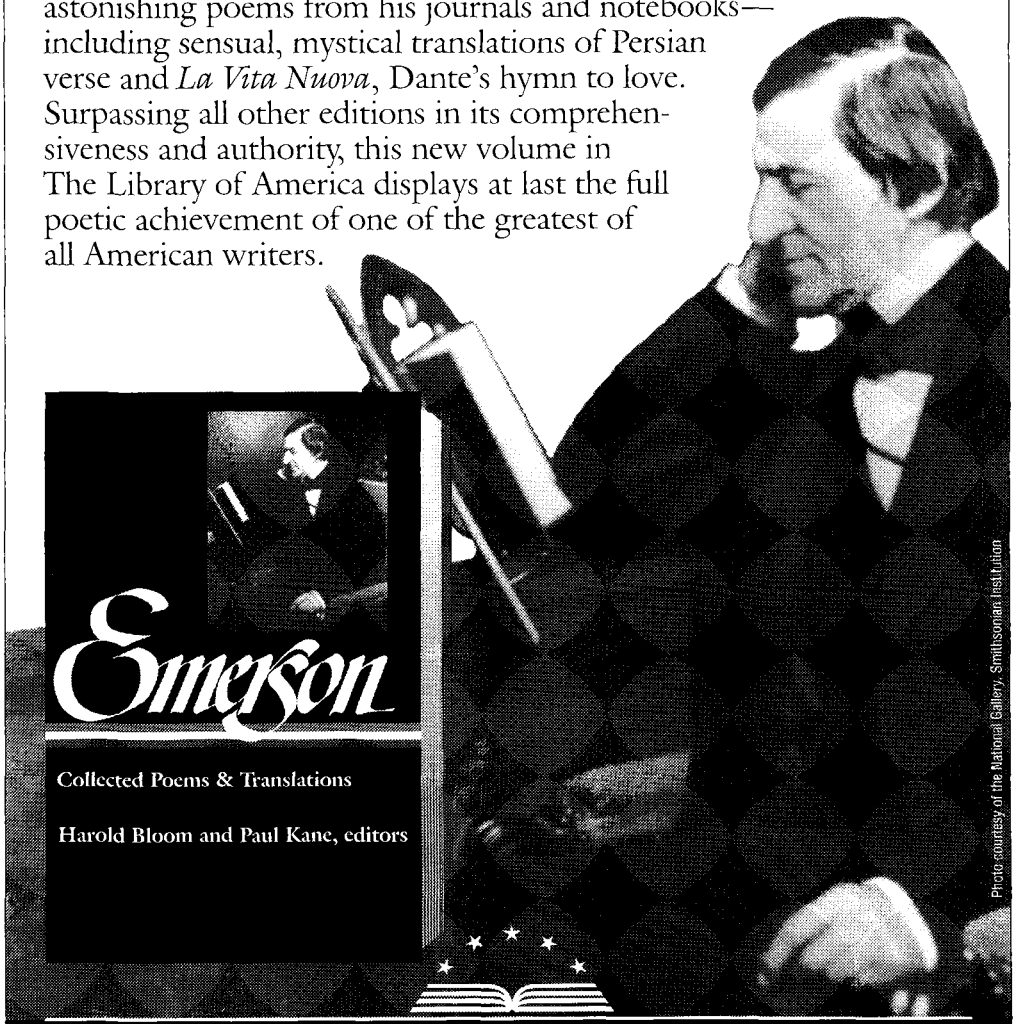
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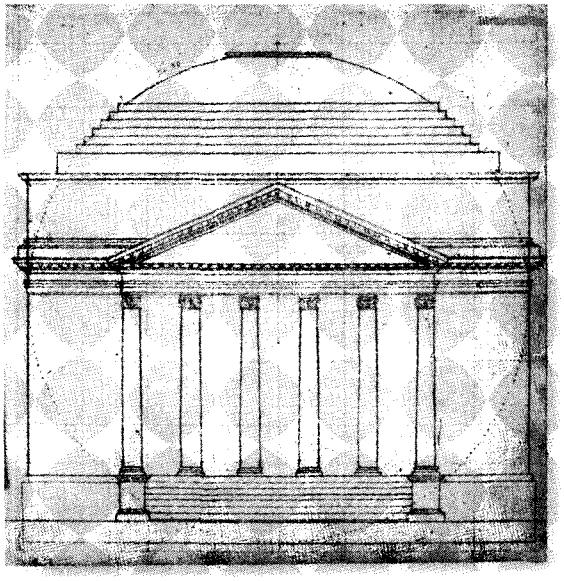

Jefferson's design for the library at the University of Virginia, circa 1817

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